

# Lessons from San Quentin

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Everything I Needed to Know about Life I Learned in Prison

Bill Dallas  
with George Barna



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.  
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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Published in association with the literary agency of Fedd and Company Inc., 9759 Concord Pass, Brentwood, TN 37027.

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dallas, Bill.

Lessons from San Quentin : everything I needed to know about life I learned in prison / Bill Dallas, with George Barna.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-2656-6 (hc)

1. Dallas, Bill. 2. Christian converts—California—San Quentin—Biography.
  3. Prisoners—California—San Quentin—Biography. 4. Prisoners—Religious life.
  5. Success—Religious aspects—Christianity. 6. California State Prison at San Quentin.
- I. Barna, George. II. Title.

BV4935.D35A3 2009

277.3'083092—dc22

[B]

2008037940

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Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10 09

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Vy,  
the greatest friend I ever had.  
You saved my life and then taught me  
how to walk.*

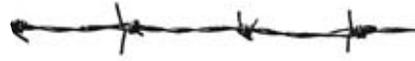


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# Foreword



I believe the world can be divided into three kinds of people based on the different ways they view the difficulties of life. The first group of people feel like “it’s over” before it even begins. They see all the bad things that *could* happen to them, or to their dreams or plans, so they attempt very little. They are convinced that anything they try will have a bad outcome and “will never work.” So they refuse to get out of their comfort zones and, therefore, never become who they were meant to be.

The second group of people experienced such a terrible failure at some point that they came to believe “it’s over.” These individuals are not like the first group of people who never tried. They did try, but when they failed, they assumed the dismal outcome was a message about themselves, their dreams, and sometimes, if the failure was large enough, about life itself. They let the failure tell them, “Forget it. You will never . . .” So they came to believe that “it’s over when it’s over.” Like the first group of people, they never became who they were meant to be. A particular failure stopped them from ever trying again.

The third group of people believe that “it’s *never* over.” They discover that if they have the few essential ingredients from which new life emerges, a failure or the death of any dream is never the end, but only the first step of a new beginning.

Further, they allow their painful experiences to become the crucibles within which they *do* become who they were meant to be. They are reinvented through the failure itself.

In this book, and in the story of Bill's life, we see the third kind of person emerging. We also learn the key ingredients that bring new life and a new person out of the death of an old one. We see that a bigger story looms behind whatever failure or pain we may be going through: it is the story of God, His love for us, and a future of hope, no matter where we find ourselves.

We will see that He is always there looking for us and offering us a way of redemption that will require each of us in some way to become a "new me" and to realize the promise He has for us. That is the essence of God's story, to pick us up in our failures and turn us into different people. As the apostle James tells us, when, through faith, we persevere in our trials and learn their lessons, we become "mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:4). Bill shows us just how true that is, no matter what depths we may hit along the road to God's future plans for us.

Bill's story demonstrates that we do not have to be one of the first two types of people, either never trying or giving up when "it's over." He shows us that even when all seems lost, it is never really over. And if we remember that God is God, we can overcome the inertia that comes from never trying or from fearing that failure has made trying once again impossible. Bill's story reminds us that God has a bigger story and plan for all of us.

Another delightful reminder in Bill's story is that God made us as we are for a reason. The problem comes when our own weaknesses and self-destructive patterns, old-fashioned sin, and immaturity interfere with His best intentions for us. You'll read about the self-destructive patterns that contributed to Bill's downfall, yet you'll also see the tremendous strengths, gifts, and talents that made him such a successful entrepreneur early in life. Later, when God picked him up off the ground in a prison yard, He did not trash the whole person He had made, the real Bill Dallas. Instead, He refined the rough edges that were keeping Bill's gifts and talents from being realized in a truly productive way. At one time Bill's gifts, when mixed with sin and immaturity, got him into trouble. Now God has taken those same gifts of creativity, energy, and people skills, which were once manipulative and self-serving, and He has redeemed them to be used in ways that not only fulfill Bill more than he ever was fulfilled before (and without causing him to self-destruct) but that also benefit millions of people through his work with the Church Communication Network (CCN).

God will do the same for you if you let Him. He will take the real person He made you to be, with all of your gifts and talents, and He will work out the kinks that are keeping those gifts from fruition. During this process of redemption, God usually does not turn apples into oranges. More often, he turns bruised, wormy apples to red, shiny fruit that will nourish others. You do not have to fear becoming a weird, alien person if you let God work in your life. Instead, you will become more of yourself—just without the worm holes and bruises.

I remember the first time I met Bill and he convinced me to begin broadcasting with CCN. I know a deal maker when I see one, and his promotion was as deft as it gets. I suspect that the investors in his real estate ventures signed up as a result of the same art of persuasion. So the old Bill is still around, enjoying his natural bent even more than he did then, I am sure. He was not sent to wear a toga in an airport when he gave himself to God. He was sent out to be himself. The difference is that now when we partner with him, we know that we are not going to be “taken” by a manipulative deal maker but are joining hands in a mission that is motivated by a real sense of mission and a pure heart. In like fashion, if you fear that God will turn you into something you are not if you make a deeper commitment to Him, you’ll discover quite the opposite: He will turn you into more of yourself, just a better version.

But as Bill also shows, that might not be exactly who you think you are now. God probably knows some things about you that you don’t, like some things that you would be good at but that currently are hidden talents buried in the ground. As you’ll see, Bill found out that he liked television production while in prison, not in the real estate business. Allow God to show you, even in your pain and failure, what He has for you. You might be surprised to find out that you have talents you didn’t even know were there and that God has opportunities for those talents to be used if only you will lay them before Him.

I feel grateful to write the foreword to Bill’s story. I remember trying to get him to tell it publicly for years, yet he did not want it to get in the way of the mission of CCN. But once he

became convinced that CCN was established enough that his past would not be an obstacle and that his story might give others hope for their futures, he decided to share it. I was lucky enough to do the initial interview on a CCN broadcast when he told it publicly for the first time. I can tell you that there was a resounding chorus of tears and appreciation for his sharing what God had done for him, with resulting hope, thanksgiving, and inspiration for all who listened. I am sure you will benefit in the same way as you read his story here.

Thank you, Bill, for sharing, and as 2 Corinthians 2:14 says, “Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.” Through your story, we give Him thanks for what He has done, can do, and will do as you and others through CCN spread “the fragrance of the knowledge of him.”

*God Bless,*

*Henry Cloud, PhD*

*Los Angeles, 2008*

# Acknowledgments



I am thankful for so many people who have helped shape my life and guide my journey.

To my wife, my best friend, and my ultimate cheerleader, Bettina, thanks for putting up with me. You are my true “Sweet, Sweet.” To my son, Dallas, I am so very proud to be your father, and I so much enjoy being with you. To my daughter, Amanda, your zest for life brings me great joy.

To the people—no, to my family at CCN. This is the greatest job I’ve ever had, and it is all because of you.

To all my ministry partners with whom I have worked over the years: Henry, John, Lee, Mark, Jim, Steve, Dennis, Gary, Roger, H. B., Tim, Les, Leslie, Joe, and Constance. I am grateful for your partnership and friendship.

To the people who showed me how to grow in Christ: Gordon, Paul, and Tony.

To the people who came alongside me to help me when I got out of prison: Dennis and Sharon, for giving me a place to stay; Toni, for all of your support; Michael, for being my friend; Ed, for giving me my first job out of prison; Reid, for helping me build the plan for CCN; and John, for backing my dreams.

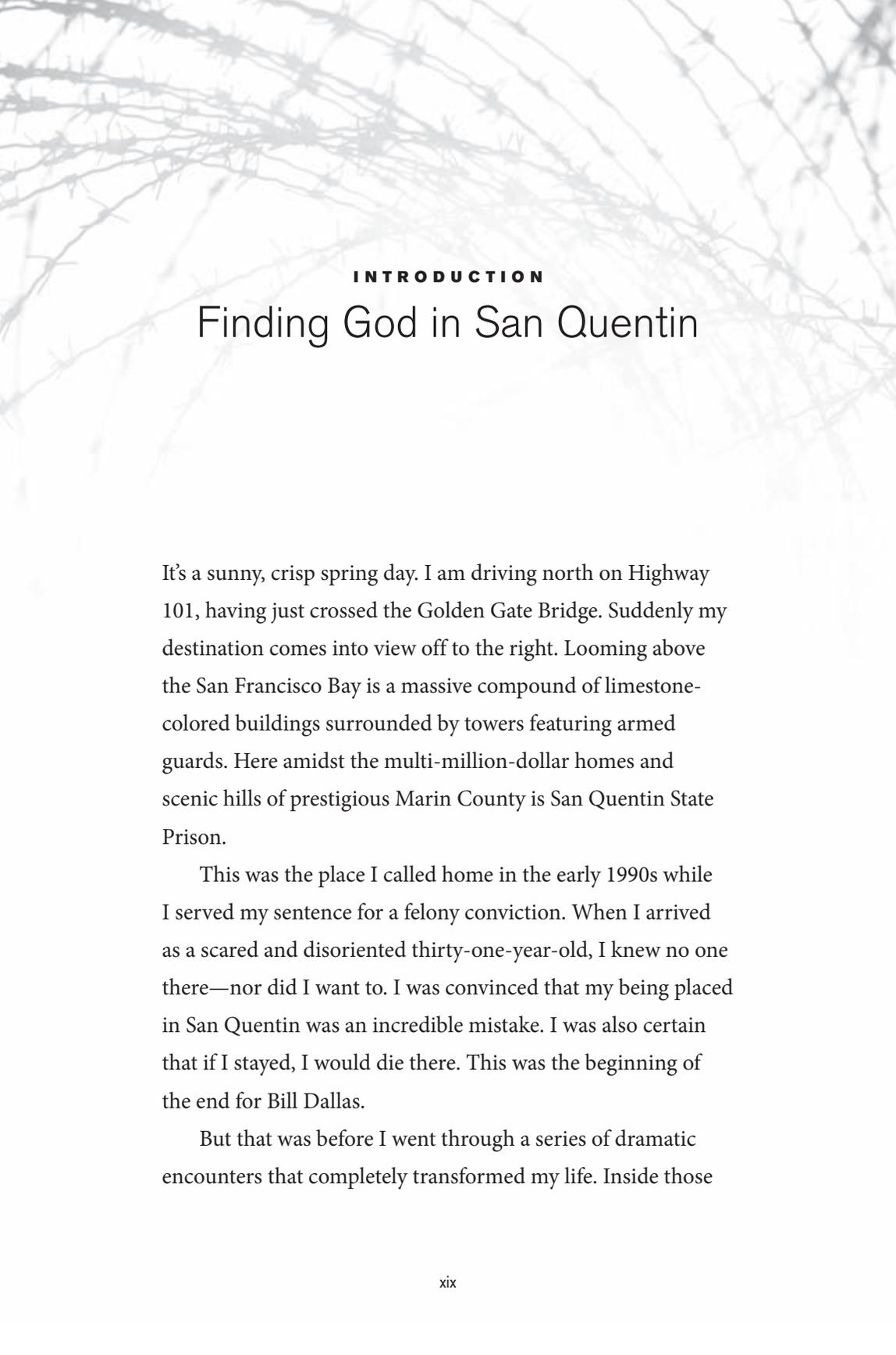
To my agent, Esther, for encouraging me to write this book.

To the team at Tyndale: Jan, Doug, Nancy, Yolanda, and Sharon, for believing in this project, and especially to my

editor, Lisa, for being patient with me and for adding all of the right spices and ingredients to make this book come alive.

To George, thank you for writing the book with me. I am so honored that you wanted to do it and so grateful for the excellent job that you did.

And, finally, to my ultimate small group, my brothers of San Quentin. This book is for you and because of you. You are truly the men of God, and I aspire to be like you.



## INTRODUCTION

# Finding God in San Quentin

It's a sunny, crisp spring day. I am driving north on Highway 101, having just crossed the Golden Gate Bridge. Suddenly my destination comes into view off to the right. Looming above the San Francisco Bay is a massive compound of limestone-colored buildings surrounded by towers featuring armed guards. Here amidst the multi-million-dollar homes and scenic hills of prestigious Marin County is San Quentin State Prison.

This was the place I called home in the early 1990s while I served my sentence for a felony conviction. When I arrived as a scared and disoriented thirty-one-year-old, I knew no one there—nor did I want to. I was convinced that my being placed in San Quentin was an incredible mistake. I was also certain that if I stayed, I would die there. This was the beginning of the end for Bill Dallas.

But that was before I went through a series of dramatic encounters that completely transformed my life. Inside those

enormous walls live a group of extraordinary men that I came to know and love during my time behind bars. Several of them have become like family to me, and since my parole, I have returned regularly to this imposing prison to visit them. To the surprise of my friends on the outside who know of my frequent visits, I actually feel a sense of peace and joy as I speed closer to the gated entryway of the prison.

Having spent countless hours looking with dread at those thick, unassailable walls from the inside, I have only positive feelings today as my eyes are drawn to the outer walls. My joy and calm anticipation are not because I endured the challenges of prison and now live as a free man. My happiness comes from knowing that this is the place where I learned to be a *real* man, the place where I discovered the principles that would eventually enable me to live a meaningful and successful life. I would not be the person I am today had it not been for the nurture and training I received behind those impregnable walls.

Despite its waterfront setting—situated on land whose estimated value exceeds \$100 million, reputedly making it the most valuable prison in the world—San Quentin is hardly a luxury hotel for criminals. It is the oldest prison in the California state prison system, constructed back in 1852 at the tail end of the gold rush. It houses roughly five thousand convicted criminals, including the state's only male death row. It also contains the state's sole gas chamber, although that space is now used only for lethal injections.

San Quentin has a colorful history. It has been the home of such infamous inmates as Charles Manson, Sirhan Sirhan,

Richard Ramirez, and even the infamous stagecoach bandit Black Bart. Country music has a history here, too, with Merle Haggard having been on the inside for burglary. Johnny Cash, the country legend who did time in another prison, played a famous concert at San Quentin in 1969, the recording of which later became one of his best-known albums.

But the who's who list of the criminal justice system is the last thing on my mind as I approach the visitor's parking lot on this day.

I am about to be reunited with Vy Le, the Vietnamese immigrant who surrendered his life to the state police and then years later to Jesus Christ. Slight of build and always smiling, Vy became my spiritual mentor through the quiet dignity of his determination to be Christlike in a den of anger and hubris.

I know I will get my usual crushing hug from Big D, a massive African American with the most tender heart you could imagine.

If all goes well I may get to see Kevin Hagan, Binh Vong, Terry Coran, Leonard Rubio, and several others who became the community that pulled me through some of the darkest days imaginable.

Every one of these dear brothers is serving a life sentence; many of them are convicted murderers. But if the occasion ever arose, I would not hesitate to sacrifice my life for them.

My time in San Quentin produced a profound awakening in my life and changed me forever.

In a strange way, I feel as if I am home.



It's always interesting for me when fellow Christians speak about their journeys with God. I've heard descriptions of the churches and Bible studies that have affected them, prayers that were answered in magnificent ways, and even times when they felt God was speaking directly to them. I can certainly relate to God's intervention, having been radically changed by the power of God through some extraordinary experiences. But my transformation didn't happen in a church auditorium or small group. It took place in a much different setting.

In much the same way that God used a prison term to capture the attention and hearts of Joseph, Daniel, and even the apostle Paul, He used my years in confinement to reshape everything about me. God can and will use any situation to mold us into the people He intends us to become—which means becoming more like His Son.

Yet even though my prison term led to a full-bore personal renaissance, I did not write this book to glorify prison life. There's not much about life behind bars that you would envy. That is, after all, the purpose of time in prison: to break you down and enable the authorities to reform you. San Quentin is not a country-club prison; it is an old, uncomfortable, remote, overcrowded, fear-inducing, spirit-breaking place. For most of the people locked within its high, thick walls, San Quentin is a place of little hope. Every day its prisoners are reminded that they have lost their most precious possessions: family, freedom, reputation, identity, and more.

Doing time in San Quentin was by far the hardest thing I have ever done. But it was also the best thing that ever happened to me, and I would not trade a single minute of that ordeal.

Looking back on my journey, it is obvious that God had to do some major reconstruction in me. My life was a wreck, but God loved me so much that He orchestrated a bizarre set of circumstances in order to get my attention and facilitate the kind of wholesale transformation I so desperately needed.

It was not until recently, as I was sharing my tale with others, that the idea of writing a book about the lessons I derived from San Quentin began to take shape. Writing such a book was a scary thought to me—much scarier than the idea of returning to the tight quarters of a prison cell. My own limitations and failings are laid bare in these pages as you join me on a return visit to some of the best and worst times of my life. You will discover all kinds of things about me that make me sick to think about now but that were the centerpiece of my life years ago.

Despite such points of discomfort and embarrassment, I am truly honored to be able to share many of the principles that I learned while incarcerated. Although these are lessons that completely changed me, I know they are neither new nor original. Indeed, Solomon observed that there is nothing new under the sun—everything old comes back in fresh ways after some time passes (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10).

So what I will be describing in this book is merely a new spin on ancient, proven truths. That's about all that any author

can offer: new hope based upon foundational truths, communicated a bit differently, but drawn from the only well of profundity that we can count on, God's Word. I pray that my unusual context for grasping these truths will resonate in your heart and motivate you to rethink and redesign aspects of your life that need to be refreshed.

In essence, this is a book about being transformed by God. I had to learn the hard way that such renewal is not about what we do or accomplish. It's about who we hope to become and what we allow God to do in our minds and hearts to facilitate growth. Make no mistake about it, growth is always painful, but the only alternative is death (which, technically, is the absence of growth). Spiritual transformation is a lifelong journey, one that I am still traveling with all kinds of starts, stops, reversals, and twists. But it is a journey I would not be on had it not been for my days in San Quentin.

And if God could get ahold of and thoroughly remake me, rest assured that He can do the same thing with you! You don't have to be convicted of murder or some other horrendous crime to benefit from the lessons God taught me in prison. Maybe your battles are with drugs or alcohol. Perhaps your marriage is on the rocks or your relationship with your children has turned sour. It could be a financial situation that keeps you up at night or health problems not even of your own making.

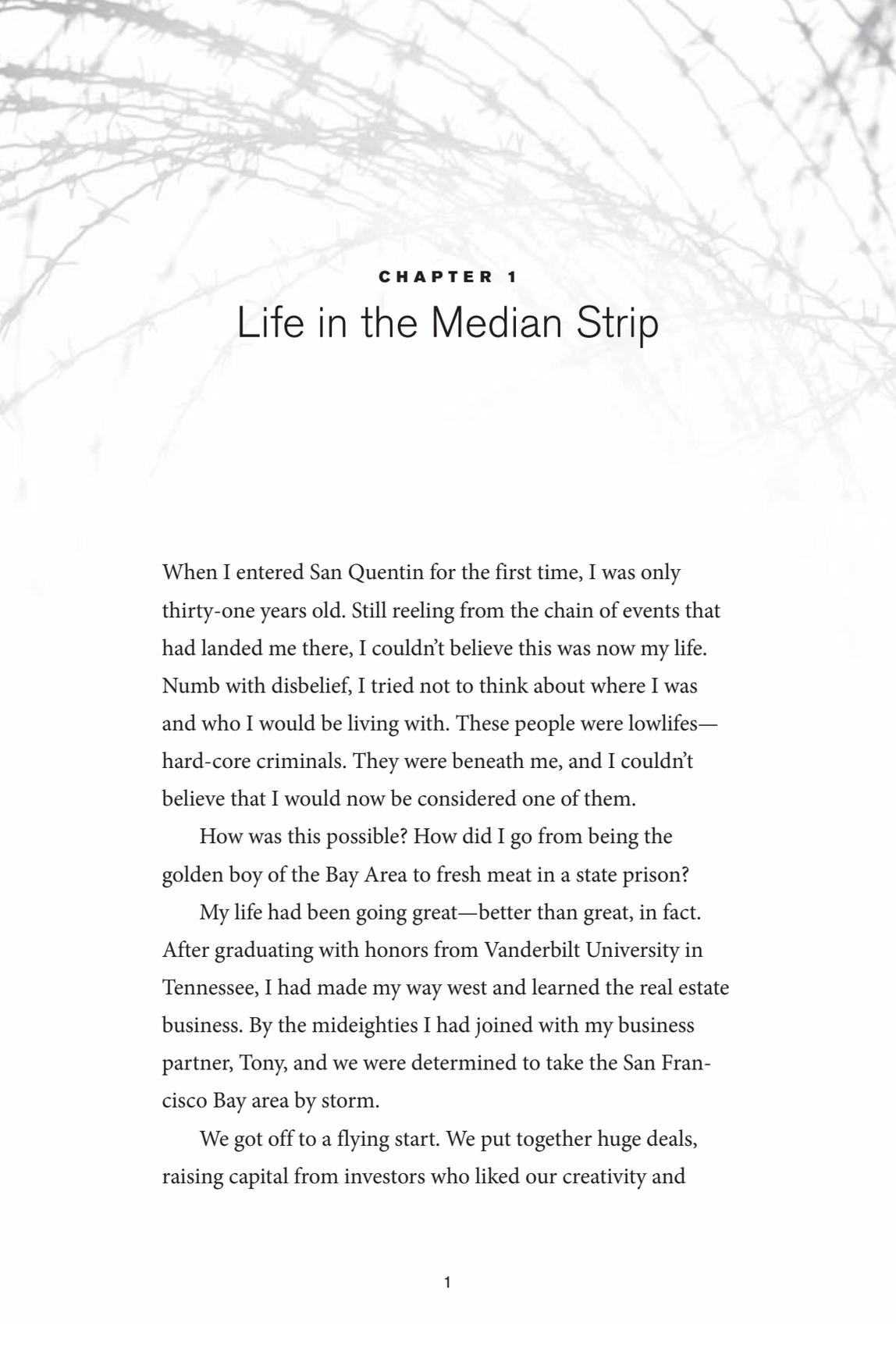
Whatever the challenge may be, we all have prisons that separate us from the love and power of God. But He promises that if we let Him inside the walls around our minds and

hearts, He will perform miracles of reconstruction, enable us to transcend our circumstances, and empower us to break through whatever is holding us back from experiencing all the joy, peace, and truth that He has in store for us.

But part of the deal is that you must be a willing partner in the process. That means not just reading a book like this, but also earnestly attempting to apply the principles that you will learn. There are no magic steps and no simple formulas. But if you devote yourself to the principles that God taught me—shards of wisdom that mirror the stories of previous hard-headed, hard-hearted men described in the Bible—then you, too, can become a new creation in Christ.

I hope that the end result will be a challenge to your character that drives you back to the Christ who has saved us from ourselves and the God who is powerful enough to transform even the most stubborn heart and ignorant mind. He will not force you to change; but if you seek His guidance and strength, He will be right there with you. I know because that is my experience with Him. It is a journey that continues to this day.

It took time behind bars for me to learn these principles. My prayer is that it will not take a sentence in San Quentin for you to “get it”—unless that is God’s best plan for your life too.



**CHAPTER 1**

# Life in the Median Strip

When I entered San Quentin for the first time, I was only thirty-one years old. Still reeling from the chain of events that had landed me there, I couldn't believe this was now my life. Numb with disbelief, I tried not to think about where I was and who I would be living with. These people were lowlifes—hard-core criminals. They were beneath me, and I couldn't believe that I would now be considered one of them.

How was this possible? How did I go from being the golden boy of the Bay Area to fresh meat in a state prison?

My life had been going great—better than great, in fact. After graduating with honors from Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, I had made my way west and learned the real estate business. By the mideighties I had joined with my business partner, Tony, and we were determined to take the San Francisco Bay area by storm.

We got off to a flying start. We put together huge deals, raising capital from investors who liked our creativity and

chutzpah. Tony and I became known as the boy wonders of the Bay Area, and we reveled in that reputation. We also believed that this was only the beginning of the riches and fame that were surely in store for us.

While some people are known for being type A personalities, I was easily a type triple A. I wasn't just living in the fast lane; I was going so fast I was burning down the median strip! Life seemed to be beckoning me for greatness, and nothing was going to stop me from living what I deemed to be the good life.

While I learned to play the real estate game in the Bay Area, I also worked as a male model. The money was good, but it was the clothing and attention that really appealed to me. Once I hit it big in real estate, I wore the finest threads available. I believed that image was everything, and I was selling it big-time. Because I needed to raise megabucks for the downtown developments I was always pushing, I knew it was critical that I looked the part of the well-to-do, successful magnate. No suit was too expensive or too finely tailored for me—Hugo Boss and Armani were my favorites. Throw in some exquisite Italian loafers and a brilliant designer tie, and with my hair gelled back, I was ready for action.

In fact, action seemed to be my middle name. I was constantly entertaining women at home, in clubs, even on the job. Cocaine was my drug of choice, and I always had a designer vodka cocktail in my hand. I loved cutting through traffic in my sleek black BMW sedan on the way to business meetings or driving my gleaming black Porsche around town on weekends.

Late at night, you could find me and my high-flying entourage cruising the city, looking for the best scene. My party mates and I regularly rented stretch limos to weave through the streets in search of the hottest clubs. Sometimes we even intentionally circled a specific club, waiting for a sufficiently long line of partyers to form behind the velvet rope outside. We wanted to pull up to the carpeted entryway and make a grand entrance.

Orchestrating favorable press coverage and wrangling introductions to the most important power players in the area became our standard operating procedure.

I quickly gained insight into how the political system worked, and I began to throw fund-raisers for key city officials—not just one candidate per race, but multiple candidates—being sure to grease their palms so they would approve our real estate projects. Often, I handed out more money than could be legally donated, but I always figured out ways to skirt the laws. Such rules were merely a minor nuisance in my climb to the top of the world.

And when it was time to work the system, we worked it mercilessly. When we desperately needed to secure city funding for a \$100 million development we were working on, I even dated a government official who would be influential in the decision-making process. The campaign coffers of several of the councilmen were filled, thanks to my generosity. In addition, Tony and I recruited people to pack a critical city council meeting and say great things about our proposed project. The line of “local residents” extended outside the council chambers

and down the block. The chairman eventually cut the meeting short, noting that the public's overwhelming sentiment for the project could not be more obvious. The city council voted in our favor.

I was Bill Dallas, boy wonder. I had it all figured out.

### III

As it turned out, there were a few things I hadn't figured out. For instance, one of the details I failed to anticipate was the real estate crash of the early nineties. When it hit, it smacked me like a two-by-four across the head. Many people were taken by surprise by this swift and deep change in the economy, but I was taken hostage.

By the spring of 1991, we had used all of the money invested in our projects to fuel our combustible lifestyle and promote other, newer projects we were setting up. The combination of out-of-control spending, not enough financial planning, and the demise of the real estate market caused us to run out of money, plain and simple. Our financial backers, some of whom were falling on tough times as well—thanks in part to my lofty promises about the returns they would be receiving—began asking about their investments, wondering why work on their projects had been halted and how they were going to fare during the real estate downturn. That's when everything started to blow up in our faces.

Our business strategy had been based on impressing people with sizzle rather than substance. We had cut corners

and manipulated every angle in an attempt to provide investors with a world-class return on their investments, which incidentally would also have meant that *we* would be rolling in cash as well.

But that dream was not to be. My business collapsed, and the life I had built around it began to crash. Big-time. Our luxurious office with its panoramic view was shut down. The phones were turned off. I was kicked out of my penthouse, and my prized toys—my homes and cars—were repossessed. My friends found new parties to enjoy and more successful party-ers to accompany. The man of the year quickly became a social leper.

As if things weren't bad enough, the legal hammer began to fall. Due to a lethal combination of ignorance and ambition, I had been handling investors' money in a way that was apparently illegal—something called commingling of funds. We had used money from one project to float another without the investors' knowledge. Although my partner and I always intended to pay back each investor after we completed our development activity, our naive and reckless approach was still against the law. Both the state and federal governments wound up filing charges against me, and a drawn-out, expensive courtroom drama began to unfold.

In the meantime, I sought any job I could get and wound up as a salesman at Nordstrom. I think I got the job because I had such fabulous clothing, but I wasn't much of a salesman on the retail floor. My heart just wasn't in it. In fact, my heart was nowhere to be found.

I was completely empty, almost numb, and had little energy for life. In the past, I had always been able to push away such feelings of emptiness with new toys, loud parties, and a lot of women. But now, without any of those things to distract me, I was faced with the fact that I didn't really like my life—or myself—at all.

Flipping through the cable channels one evening, I stopped to listen to a TV preacher talk about salvation and getting right with God. Up to that point in my life, I hadn't had much to do with religion. While I was growing up, my family had been tangentially involved in Christianity. Although my father never attended any church activities, my mother sometimes attended a local Protestant church, and I went to the Sunday school on those occasions. Those classes exposed me to some of the stories and values that form the basis of Christianity. But I never really understood the big deal about Jesus Christ. Mom and I found the church people to be nice, and she especially enjoyed the potluck meals and the special events, but we were never active in the church or in the pursuit of genuine faith.

That spiritual apathy was the norm for me until age fourteen, when the brother of one of my best friends led an impromptu Bible study. He talked about our sin problem and how Christ had died on the cross to save us from the punishment we deserved. I was aghast. As he painted the picture—God's sacrificial love delivered through the murder of Jesus, necessitated by my wayward behavior and corrupted mind—it was clear that I needed to do something about it.

After that meeting, I began to pray constantly for forgiveness. When I say constantly, I mean just that: I literally prayed two to three hundred times each day, asking God to forgive everything I was doing and everything I had previously done. I was a wreck over the fact that I was a habitual, lifelong sinner! I did not have a relationship with Christ, only a foreboding fear of wrongdoing and the inevitable eternal punishment if I didn't get it right.

The church my friend attended was highly legalistic, and every time we went, we were bombarded with an overwhelming parcel of rules and regulations we needed to satisfy. It was truly unbearable, but having been scared out of my wits by this church's convicting doctrines about the wrath of God and the wickedness of man, I felt there was no escape. I had no choice but to keep trying to do better and to continually beg for forgiveness. Religion became the heaviest burden I had yet encountered.

The appeal of that religious group was that it provided clear-cut parameters and some semblance of stability for a young boy raised in a very dysfunctional family. When my father died, I became the man of the house by default. It was no easy responsibility to bear, and the combined expectations of God and family soon became too much for me to handle. I was on the verge of cracking up. Religion was only adding to my guilt and shame. No matter how hard I tried, I always felt that it wasn't enough and that I was losing ground on God's scale of perfection.

Later, I was introduced to Young Life, a national

parachurch ministry that works with teenagers. This group had a more balanced theology and was the first to teach me about God's grace in response to my sinful ways. As reassuring as that approach was, it led to major confusion in my mind. Was He a God of perfection, holiness, and grand expectations, or was He a God of love, forgiveness, and grace? I wanted to believe the latter, but I was fearful that it might be the former.

By the time I was in my junior year of high school, I hit the wall. Having reached my breaking point and seeing no way to reconcile the competing points of view and excessive demands associated with faith in God, I felt I had to flee the whole thing. I knelt down and prayed to God, asking Him to forgive me (of course!) for having to leave religion altogether. I confessed that if I did not give it up I would surely lose my mind. I was absolutely stressed over the confusion and weight that religion had laid on me, so I followed my instinct, which was to apologize and run.

For the next thirteen years, God was not part of the equation. I sealed off that part of my life and focused on doing the best I could with whatever morals, values, and character attributes I had gleaned by that time.

Now listening to the television preacher on that lonely night in July of 1991, I vaguely recalled hearing an intriguing comment attributed to Blaise Pascal, something about how each of us had a God-shaped hole in our hearts that only He could fill. That made sense to me. I had tried everything—money, drugs, sex, alcohol, travel, clothing, political influence,

cars, houses—and I was still empty inside. The void that characterized my life could only be filled by something huge—something superhuman, something supernatural, something beyond the limitations of everything I had tried.

So with nothing to lose and everything to gain, on July 11, 1991, I fell to my hands and knees and asked Jesus into my heart. Little did I know that an attorney would one day defend me in court by quoting Jesus: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

With little else to live for at that point—retail sales failed to get my juices flowing—I got pretty pumped about the Christian faith and began reading the Bible and memorizing Scripture verses like crazy. I’ve always had a good memory, and since Christians seemed to treasure Scripture memorization, this was an easy way for me to get in the game. Eventually I decided to commit much of the New Testament to memory. That was me, all right: driven and over the top.

In retrospect, it would have been more helpful if I had devoted my time to simply understanding what a relationship with Christ meant and how to nurture it. But somehow I completely missed the fact that Christianity is not something you do, it is about a relationship with God and who you become through that divine connection. I had no idea at the time that my biggest issue in life was the superficiality of my character—or that the only antidote for that disease was a full-on commitment to allowing God to transform that character. Instead, I did what I had always done best: analyze, understand,

and act. Deciding to become a Christian was simply a calculated, intellectual choice, and my bull-in-a-china-shop approach to Christianity was characteristic of me: understanding something without emotionally investing in it.

A short while after becoming a Christian, I found that I had some time on my hands while the lawyers battled over my fate. I thought it would be fun to work with young people who were seeking to develop their faith in Christ, so I started volunteering with the local Young Life program. I met some outstanding people who were committed to serving the teenagers in the program, but despite the upswing in my spiritual life, there was no getting away from the increasingly claustrophobic legal realities that confronted me. After a year and a half of expensive, embarrassing, and contentious legal defense, I could no longer ignore reality. I was convicted of felony grand theft embezzlement and sentenced to five years in prison.

I was in a state of disbelief. Up to this point, I had never even given much thought to the charges that had been brought against me. I figured my lawyers would work things out and come up with a way for me to get out of the situation. Even though I had become a Christian, I still had such a disconnect with reality that it had been easy to live in a state of denial, focusing only on the here and now.

For the first time in my life, I was forced to face the consequences of my actions. My crime was considered among the more serious offenses a person can commit, short of murder or rape. Besides a stiff prison term, I lost some of my rights as an American citizen. I would no longer be allowed to vote

unless I received a full pardon from the governor. I would not be able to serve on a jury or purchase firearms.

I would also be faced with additional restrictions after I was paroled. For the three years of my parole, I would not be allowed to drink alcoholic beverages. I would be required to submit to antinarcotic testing at the will of my parole officer. I would not be allowed to work in real estate or in professions closely associated with my offense, such as financial services. There could be no outside contact with Tony, my former business partner who was convicted of the same crime. Every time I applied for a job, I would have to inform the potential employer of my transgression. And I would not be allowed to start my own business.

On top of that, I was liable for multiple fines, taxes, and other payments—one of the fines alone was \$750,000. I also would need to have regular check-ins with my parole and probation officers, could not live more than fifty miles from their location, and could not leave the area without their approval.

But I'm getting ahead of the story. Before I could enjoy the relative freedom of parole, I had to complete my prison term. I didn't realize it at the time, but my life was about to change. Dramatically.

# Endnotes



1. A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1955).

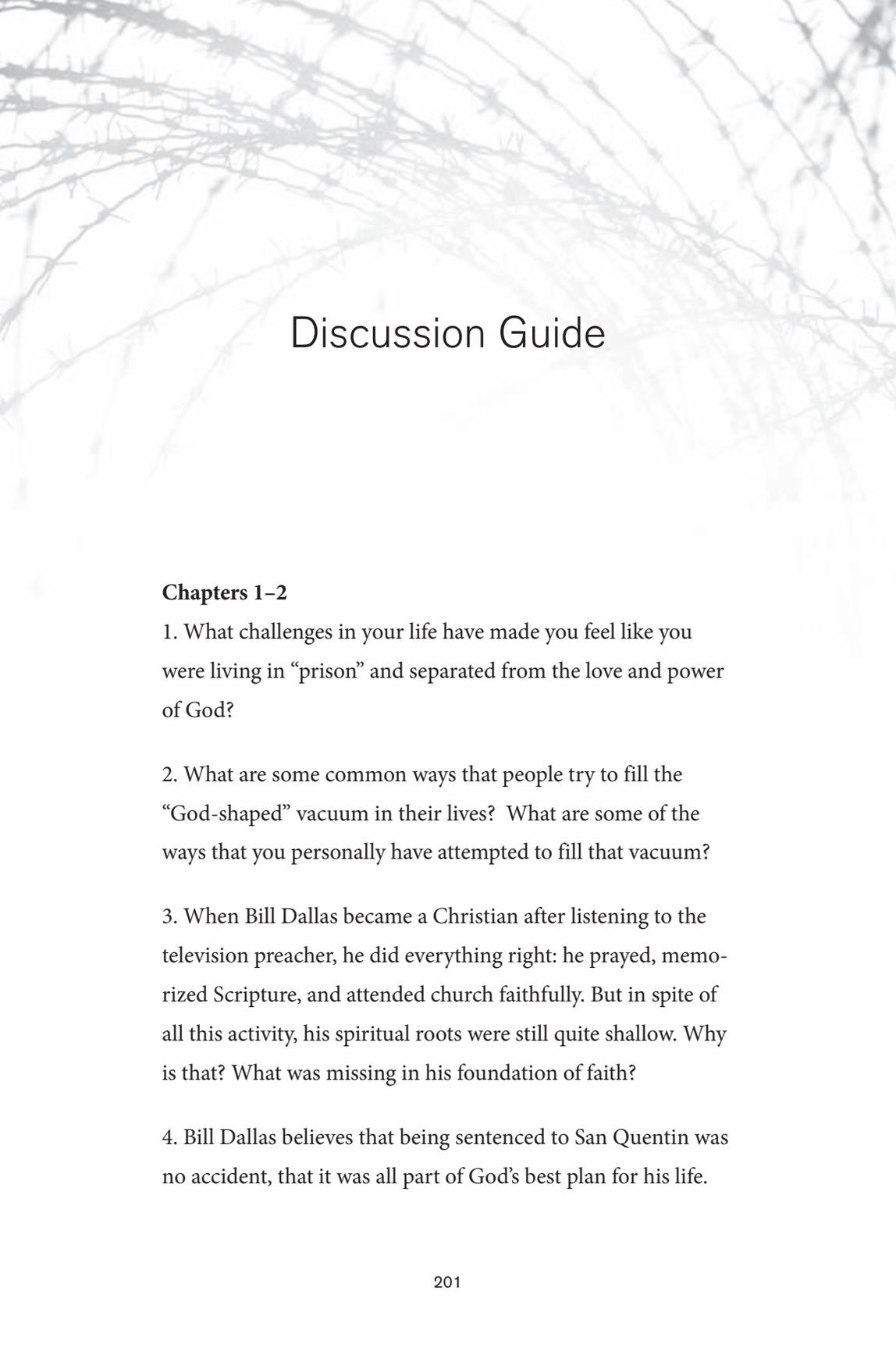
2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 67.

3. National surveys by The Barna Group, a marketing research firm in Ventura, California, indicate that although 83 percent of the adult population describe themselves as Christian, just 22 percent say their relationship with God or Jesus Christ is the most important relationship in their lives. Also, fewer than one out of every five say they have a deep and intimate relationship with God today. For more information about Americans' spiritual condition, visit <http://www.barna.org>; also, see *Revolution* by George Barna (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005).

4. David Crary, "Record-High Ratio of Americans in Prison," *USA Today*, February 28, 2008.

5. These statistics are from The Barna Group and are based on its national tracking studies of lifestyles and attitudes. These tracking surveys interview a minimum of one thousand adults based on a national sample of people eighteen or older. For more information, visit <http://www.barna.org>.

6. *Ibid.*

The background of the page is a light gray, semi-transparent image of barbed wire, with the sharp points of the wire creating a complex, web-like pattern across the entire surface.

# Discussion Guide

## **Chapters 1–2**

1. What challenges in your life have made you feel like you were living in “prison” and separated from the love and power of God?
2. What are some common ways that people try to fill the “God-shaped” vacuum in their lives? What are some of the ways that you personally have attempted to fill that vacuum?
3. When Bill Dallas became a Christian after listening to the television preacher, he did everything right: he prayed, memorized Scripture, and attended church faithfully. But in spite of all this activity, his spiritual roots were still quite shallow. Why is that? What was missing in his foundation of faith?
4. Bill Dallas believes that being sentenced to San Quentin was no accident, that it was all part of God’s best plan for his life.

What were the “coincidences” that had to occur in order for him to end up in San Quentin? Do you believe these were God orchestrated? Why?

### **Chapters 3–4**

1. Do you believe that God has a plan for each person’s life? If so, how do you see this playing out in your own life?
2. Do you embrace or run from trials? What are some of the ways that trials can be stepping-stones to a better life? What trials have you faced that ultimately led you to a better life?
3. What do you think causes people to lose hope? Where do you find hope when life seems most hopeless?
4. When you feel hopeless, what kinds of things help you hang on until you find hope again?
5. What is one thing you can do this week to practice the principles of embracing trials and hanging on until hope returns?

### **Chapters 5–6**

1. What is your attitude toward work? Do you consider it a blessing or a curse? Why?
2. Have you found your own sweet spot? What particular skills and abilities has God gifted you with? How might you use these gifts to express yourself and serve Him best?
3. Bill Dallas viewed Christianity as a set of impossible standards that he could never meet no matter how hard he tried.

## About the Authors



**Bill Dallas** is the CEO of the Church Communication Network (CCN), a satellite and Internet communications company serving thousands of churches across North America. He hosts *Solutions*, a weekly satellite program with Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend. A former Young Life leader and Bible study teacher, Bill is a graduate of Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He is the proud father of Dallas and Amanda. Bill and his wife, Bettina, live in northern California.

**George Barna** is the founder and directing leader of The Barna Group, Ltd., a California-based company that offers primary research and strategic assistance related to cultural assessment and transformation, faith dynamics, and leadership development. He writes the popular biweekly *Barna Update* regarding his current research related to faith and cultural dynamics, available at <http://www.barna.org>. To date, Barna has written more than forty books, including the best sellers *Revolution*, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, *The Frog in the Kettle*, and *The Power of Vision*. He has been married to his wife, Nancy, since 1978 and has three daughters, Samantha, Corban, and Christine.