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Introduction

I wrote *God's Graffiti* to make a point: Just like graffiti, our lives may not seem to communicate much of anything to other people. They may look at all of the problems, mistakes, pain, sadness, failure, or disappointments and not know what to make of it all.

It's the same with graffiti; some people look at it and don't get the message or meaning. They miss the beauty of the colors, the uniqueness of every line, the story behind the images, and the overall point that the artist is trying to make. Because we spend too much time worrying about what's wrong in our lives, we miss the beauty, meaning, and deeper story behind the experiences that God uses to write the stories of our lives.

Graffiti was once considered something that couldn't be understood, had no value, and needed to be painted over so that no one would know it existed. But graffiti (and its creators) has persevered and overcome the shallow opinions of its critics. Today graffiti is displayed in museums all over the world, and graffiti artists travel the globe to tell their stories, through this art form, which is a unique, complicated display of the artist's heart and thoughts.

All of us are *God's Graffiti*. At times our lives can be messy; our mistakes are often on display for people to judge

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and critique. Our pain becomes the focal point that distracts us from seeing the bigger picture. Sometimes when we look at our lives, they just look confusing, lacking meaning and needing to be covered up. But what we fail to realize is that through it all, there is a purpose, a direction, a story. If we stepped back and took the time to see what God is trying to say through the graffiti of our lives, we would see something beautiful.

God's Graffiti: Inspiring Stories for Teens takes a look at young men and women in the Bible who overcame family and community challenges in order to become the leaders we recognize today. Their stories and the ways that they overcame personal challenges give us some practical guidance for our own lives. You have the ability to do amazing things through your faith in God, the courage to try something different, and the help of a few committed people.

To understand why I wrote this book, you need to know my personal journey of faith through hard life experiences. I was raised in poverty, surrounded by drug dealers, gangs, and community violence. My mother was addicted to crack cocaine and alcohol. I rarely went to church and did not have strong spiritual beliefs for most of my teen years. I was the perfect negative stereotype of a young black man. But the truth is that no one wants to live “down” to stereotype. What we all want is the opportunity to be our best selves.

This book presents Bible characters and leaders whose lives were like those of many young people who are growing up just as I did. By showing the challenges that were faced by highly respected people in the Bible, the stories in this book can provide hope, guidance, and strategies that

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can help all of us to make different, better, and more spirited choices.

So, how did I come to make different, better, more spirited choices than those I might have made otherwise? It was not easy. It was a very long road. And it began by walking through the pain of being part of my loving, addicted, and sometimes violent family.

I must start by admitting that I have engaged in many behaviors of which I am not proud. I learned these behaviors in my neighborhood and from my family. I stopped them because of the devastation that I observed in my neighborhood and in the broken hearts and lives of my family and friends. I stopped engaging in them because somehow God's grace found and saved me when no one and nothing else could.

We Weren't Church-Goers

It took me a long time to find God's grace. My family did not take me to church to introduce me to God. Church is a big deal. Obviously, it is a place where God is worshiped. Church is also a place where a community of believers gathers to honor God together. Going to church represents a spiritual practice for people and their families. Church is a special and sacred space that is a routine part of the lives of many people.

Church was not a routine part of my young life. My family rarely went to church. There are only a few Saturday evenings that I can remember my mother saying to me, "Romal, tomorrow you're going to church." The next morning she would get me dressed up in a white dress shirt,

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clip-on tie, sweater vest, blue pants, and patent leather dress shoes. Once I was ready to go, I'd sit patiently, waiting to be picked up. When my mother's friend arrived with her family, I would head off to church. On those few occasions when I went to church, my mother did not go with me. I never understood why she didn't go to church with me. I wasn't sure if it was because she thought people in church would judge her, if she was ashamed, or if she felt it wasn't going to change anything. Regardless of the reason, I felt her absence strongly because I wanted us to be together and do things as a family.

In Baptist churches, you join the church (become a member) when you are old enough to understand the meaning of the faith. Although there were times when I wanted to join, I was too nervous and afraid when I was a child. The idea of being stared at by people as I walked down the long aisle toward the pastor made me nervous enough to second-guess myself.

There was also the issue of my mother. Even though she sent me to church with one of her friends, I worried that she would be angry if I made such an important decision without her permission. I was clearly looking for something spiritual to strengthen my life, but I remember going to church perhaps five times between the ages of nine and twenty-one. My family environment was filled with tragedy, unfortunate circumstances, and people making bad choices; religion was not part of the equation that was the math of my family life.

Instead, the equation of my family's life was a much sadder and less spiritual one. My mother was a single parent who was seventeen years old when I was born. Because she was

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so young and so alone, I spent most of my life with her family members: my three uncles, my aunt, and my grandparents. My relatives were loving people who stepped in and did the best they could to make sure that I was well taken care of.

My job was to survive and try to do well in school. That I should take school seriously was hard advice to listen to when they were not setting the example that school was important. We didn't have much money; my aunt and uncles held jobs most of the time but also had to find other ways to make ends meet. My family members were street smart and taught me about the financial benefits of selling drugs, the importance of respect on the streets, and the inevitable violence of the neighborhood.

My Family's Self-Sabotage

I remember watching a television show one day that told the story of a woman who had been addicted to drugs but was now in a rehabilitation program. She was getting close to being reunited with her young daughter, who had been taken away because of this woman's addiction. Two social workers showed up at the woman's house to see how much progress she had made and determine if they would allow her to reunite with her daughter.

In the show, everything looked fine, and the social workers were about to leave. But one stopped and began to check the trash. She found evidence that the woman had been getting high. The social workers told the mother that she would not be reunited with her daughter, and the poor woman screamed in agony.

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I remember that one of the social workers asked the other, "Why did she do that? She was so close to getting her daughter back." And the other social worker replied, "It's called self-sabotage. It's when you want something so bad that you do something to mess it up." I'll never forget the day I saw that show. I said to myself, *That's my family.*

My uncles and aunt had lives that were examples of what happens when you engage in self-sabotage. They had great talents but were not able to get away from their personal demons, the challenges and temptations present in our community, and plain bad luck.

All of my uncles were talented athletes. My oldest uncle, who was a twin, had received a scholarship to play college football. His education and football career came to a halt when he went to jail because he shot and killed someone. His twin brother was also a football player who never pursued college because he was functionally illiterate even though he graduated from high school. For the most part, he hustled the best way he could and did maintenance work for people around their homes.

The youngest of my uncles was a high school baseball pitcher whose talents were celebrated in photos and newspapers. I often asked him to tell me stories about his baseball career and to show me his scrapbooks and photo albums. Coaches thought that my uncle was destined to play in the major leagues, but he did not pay enough attention to his increasingly sore elbow. He required surgery and was never able to pitch again. This uncle graduated from high school but never attended college.

All of my uncles were considered tough guys. Everyone in

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the community knew our family name for the wrong reasons. The uncles who were twins had a reputation for violence. When I walked the streets at night or found myself in a dangerous situation, all I had to do was mention my uncles and people would leave me alone.

I never knew much about my aunt, a very tough woman who loved children. She always bought me and my cousin, one of the twins' daughter, toys and clothes for special occasions and holidays and took us on trips to parks, museums, and the local fair. In addition to caring for us, she took in her friend's son when her friend went to jail. My aunt didn't live the most legal life. She did construction work, but my memories of what she did for a living was sell drugs. She loved to knit; when she turned herself in or went to jail, she spent her spare time knitting the most beautiful sweaters for my cousin and me.

Most of the memories of my aunt and uncles are from times when we all gathered at my grandparents' home for the holidays. Typically those days would start out with lots of fun activities, great food, laughter, music, and stories about good times that we had shared. But most of our family gatherings ended with arguments and violent fights between the brothers or with their sister, who could hold her own. More often than not these altercations were the result of too many drugs and too much alcohol. Eventually family members would start leaving before anyone was seriously injured, and then the police would be called because someone pulled out a weapon.

Just as my mother was a not a religious person, so religion was never a large part of the lives of her brothers and sister. They would grumble and say that church was fake, the men

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who went were soft, church people gossiped, and preachers just wanted to take your money. The only time I remember seeing my uncles and aunt dressed for church was when they attended funerals. At those times they were not seeking relationships with God; they were going only to pay their respects to friends who had died.

For reasons that I never entirely understood, I was always curious about religion and would tell my uncles that I wanted to go to church to learn more about God. After they made it clear that they did not want to hear me mention God or religion one more time, I kept my interests in God, religion, and the state of my soul to myself. After all, these were people who loved me and cared for me. I wanted to please them. But I knew at a very young age that my family was unable to give me the spiritual guidance that I wanted.

Loving Me to Wholeness

I am certain that my family members probably considered how I would turn out a bit of a mystery. After all, my mother, her sister, and all of her brothers had serious substance abuse and legal problems, and they all were raised by my grandparents. Sometimes, time changes things. What I know is this: my grandparents were a blessing to me and were the main source of happiness and stability in my life. I firmly believe that the love and influence of my grandparents kept me from becoming a hardcore gang member.

My grandmother, Momma, was a homemaker who kept the house spotless and was an amazing cook. It's almost a stereotype, isn't it? I loved spending time at home with her.

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Just hearing Momma laugh would make even the worst day brighter. If I was hanging out on the corner with friends and things got boring or dangerous for me, I would go to my grandparents' house. If Momma wasn't cleaning the house or cooking for the family, she could always be found sitting in her favorite chair—no one could sit in that chair but her—watching TV. She loved to watch cowboy movies and police and detective shows like *Chips*, *Kojak*, *Perry Mason*, and *Maverick*. I'd come in and sit on the couch next to her or sit beside her on the floor. I'd lay my head on her lap and we'd watch TV together. Most of the time I'd fall asleep right there on the floor.

As was the case with my aunt and uncles, Momma's personal story was filled with holes. She was not an educated woman and could not read. My grandmother was raised in Mississippi, but she never shared much information about her family with me. When one of my cousins began a family tree a few years ago, I was shocked to learn that my grandmother was previously married and had had another child. No one knows why she left, but it must have been pretty bad for her to leave her child. She met my grandfather when they were both working in a Civil Conservation Camp. These camps were part of a work relief program in the 1930s and '40s for poor people during the Great Depression. I guess that's where my grandparents fell in love. Later on Momma traveled with my grandfather to California, never returning to Mississippi. My grandmother had a heart of gold. She treated everyone she met with love and would help anyone she could, whether they were a neighbor or a relative. She gave that love to me; she seemed to know how much I

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needed it. Maybe she was determined that her love would make me turn out all right. Maybe she wanted to give me what her parents have never given her. I don't know. But Momma really loved me.

My grandmother was the first person I ever heard pray. Every night she would go to her bedroom. As I relaxed on the couch in the living room, I would hear her recapping the events of the day. After she talked about the needs of her children and the family, she would then ask God for help. My grandmother never went to church, but I know she loved God and strongly believed in the power of prayer.

When You Can't Go Home Again

My grandfather was a strong and hard-working man. He worked in the shipyard in San Francisco. He and Momma finally settled in Vallejo, California, where he bought my grandmother a small house in a neighborhood called Country Club Crest. Most people knew this neighborhood as The Crest or Killer Crest Side. There was nothing country club about it. It was a poor community plagued by all of the problems of any inner-city neighborhood. In this place, my grandfather, or "Daddy," as I called him, taught me a lot about hard work. This proud man worked at the shipyards for thirty-eight years without taking a sick day.

Daddy had his issues, though. He was an alcoholic. He drank every day, and he drank a lot, sometimes to the point of passing out. He and my grandmother argued about his drinking. They loved each other, but their relationship was not an intimate one. I never saw them hold hands or share a

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hug or any other form of affection. In spite of his problems, Daddy had a good heart. He loved my mom; she was his favorite child, and I was his favorite grandchild. It was great to hang out with my grandfather. I would sit in the shed with him while he drank. He taught me the importance of saving money, of working hard, and of having a steady job. Daddy opened my first bank account and showed me how to use a checkbook. Daddy even taught me how to sing the blues. Most importantly, he always told me he loved me. People in my family did not use those words often. The problem was that, like my mom, Daddy told me that he loved me only when he was drunk.

Like Momma, Daddy was a southerner, from Louisiana. He was unable to return to his hometown because of a terrible incident that happened when he took his young nephew to a store for beer and candy. They were standing behind the saloon in the areas designated for blacks to enter. A white man came to the back of the saloon for whatever reason and saw my grandfather holding a large amount of money. The man then said, "Where did you get all of that money, nigga, you must have stole it." Then he tried to snatch the money from my grandfather's hand. Daddy did not take insults lightly. He reached into his belt clip, grabbed his knife, and stabbed the man. When he fell to the ground, no one watching said a word. My grandfather started walking down the train tracks. His nephew asked, "Where are you going?" He replied, "I don't know," and that was the last day my grandfather's nephew or anyone else in my grandfather's family ever saw him. Daddy managed to get out of Louisiana without being thrown in jail or lynched. I

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imagine his actions were one of the reasons why he drank so much and why he sang the blues.

Daddy always encouraged me to do the right thing, and I tried hard not to disappoint him. He later developed asbestos poisoning from working in the shipyard. Seeing him with an oxygen tank and struggling for breath was hard. After completing high school I joined the army. When I completed basic training, I was blessed to see Daddy one more time before he died. I returned home in my uniform and participated in his funeral.

My Life as a Drug Dealer

Even though my grandparents did not have the closest relationship, it was clear that they depended on each other. I think in some way they had decided to become for each other the family they had had to leave. They were loyal to each other no matter what happened; nothing ever tore them away from each other. My grandmother always encouraged me to stay in school. Momma asked me not to hang out on the street corners with the other guys but, if I did, to be careful. She was the reason I stopped selling drugs.

When crack cocaine hit our neighborhood, everything changed. Everyone seemed to be selling crack, and those who weren't selling it were smoking it. It was the worst thing that ever happened to my neighborhood and to my family. All of my uncles and my mom smoked crack. I was never sure if my aunt was addicted to crack, but I knew that she sold it. After my mom became addicted, I had to fend for myself in order to eat, buy school clothes, and get everything else I

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needed. With so little family support, it was only a matter of time before I started selling crack. I never enjoyed selling drugs. I felt terrible for the families of addicts, and more than that, after hearing some of the terrible stories from my uncle about his time in prison for murder, I didn't want to end up in jail. But the reasons that my days as a drug dealer were brief had nothing to do with any of this.

One day after hanging on the corner selling drugs with friends I decided to take a break, go to Momma's house, and sort through my sales for the day. When I arrived at my grandmother's house, she was sitting in her chair watching TV. I sat down on the couch next to her, took out my money, and set it on the coffee table as a sign to her that I had money and I was okay. Then I took out the drugs and set them on the table to start figuring out how I'd move my last packages. As I sat there sorting through the drugs, my grandmother watched in silence. Finally she asked, "Romal, what is that?"

I said to her, "It's crack, Momma."

"Crack? What's that?"

"It's what they're smoking in the streets."

Momma held out her hand and said, "Let me see it." I handed her a rock, and she sat silently holding it in the palm of her hand, just staring. Her silence was deafening, and the look in her eyes saddened me. Finally she said, "Hmm, so this is what these niggas are killing themselves for, huh?" Then she leaned towards me, handed it back, and said, "Here." At that moment I realized what her silence was all about. Crack was killing her family. Crack and those who sold it were taking her children away from her. Crack had her daughter—my mother—living on the streets and missing

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in action for months at a time. I thought, *Yes, Momma, this is crack*. Our family had always had its problems, but crack is what killed it.

It pained me to reach out and take the drugs from her hand, but in that moment I also realized that I couldn't sell drugs anymore. I couldn't hurt my grandmother or contribute to the devastation of our family. I took the crack from her hand, gathered my money and the rest of my packages from the coffee table, and went back up on the block. When I got to the corner I saw my partner in crime—for his safety we'll call him D—the person who got me involved in the dope game. We had grown up together and were very close. If you didn't know him you'd think he was kind, but he had a short fuse. If D got angry, things got violent really fast. My partner was one my closest friends and protectors on the street. This is a guy who stood in front of me one night when someone pulled a gun on me and threatened to kill me. He was the kind of friend who would take a bullet for you if he had to. There aren't too many people who will do that.

When I got to the corner that day D was just completing a sale. I walked up, looked him in the eye, and said, "Man, I can't do it," then handed him my remaining packages. He knew me well enough to believe me. I even think he was glad that I wanted to stop. He was among the people who used to tell me I should go to school because I wasn't built for the streets, I cared too much. When I handed him the drugs he looked at me and said, "It's cool." I breathed a sigh of relief, turned, and walked back to Momma's house. When I got there, instead of sitting on the couch, I sat on the floor next to her and laid my head on her lap just the way I used to do

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when I was a little boy. Neither of us said a word, but Momma knew the important decision that I had made, and I knew she had saved my life.

No Choice but to Leave

Once I decided that I couldn't sell drugs or do any of the other things my crew was doing to make money, I had a decision to make. One day while my uncle and his wife went grocery shopping with the rest of the family, I decided to stay home. I didn't want to go because I was stressed over how I was going to get money. My mother was an addict, I gave up the dope game and everything that came with it, but I still needed money. School was going to be starting in a few weeks, and I needed new clothes. Normally I could have given a crackhead some dope to steal everything I needed, or I could buy it myself. But I was broke. When my family left for the store, I stayed home to come up with a plan for how I would rob someone. There was a nice neighborhood in walking distance. My plan was to go into that neighborhood after dark, catch someone walking alone, knock the person unconscious or shoot him (or her) if necessary. Then I would take whatever money he had and follow a route back to my neighborhood that would cover my tracks.

While I sat there on living room floor thinking through my plan, I realized that I didn't want to do it. There was the risk of getting caught, the fear of going to jail, and the guilt of knowing that I hurt someone or even killed for money. That realization led to fear and sadness. If I wasn't willing to sell drugs, rob people, or steal, then how would I ever make it in

this neighborhood? My friends didn't go to school; they sold drugs, got high, or were gangbangers. If I didn't do any of that, I didn't have any friends. I realized that there was no way I could make it, and I needed to leave.

God Changes Everything

Research tells us that, for better or for worse, our families and their challenges and triumphs make us who we are. Our families are not perfect. We must accept our families for what they are, but we do not have to imitate the worst parts of them. We must love the members of our families as best we can and must always love the best in them. Neither of these things is easy to do.

This is what I knew about the challenges given me by the family I was born into: for most of my childhood, my mother was a drug addict and an alcoholic.

Two years after my mother became a drug addict and an alcoholic, I met my father. I decided that I wanted to go live with him in New Jersey. Most of my family, even my mother, didn't want me to leave California, although she was never around to care for me. Momma told me to move to New Jersey and not to look back. "There's nothing here but trouble," she said. I took her advice, returning only for my grandfather's funeral and a few years after that for Momma's.

When I left California to live in New Jersey with my father, I rarely heard from my mother. Almost every time I called to speak to my grandparents in California, they would tell me that they had not seen my mother for a month. When I did talk to my mother, she would make a lot of promises that she

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could not keep. It hurt so much to talk to her that I eventually decided to let go of any dreams I had for our relationship. I couldn't handle the emotional pain anymore.

All of us have pain, of course. And all of us manage our pain in different ways. My mother dealt with her pain by medicating herself with drugs. I was so heartbroken by what happened to her and by how our relationship was affected that there was no way that I would have taken drugs or become an alcoholic. I needed another way to soothe my hurts.

I chose God. I finally acted on my childhood curiosity about faith. When I was twenty-two years old, I was no longer as anxious as I had been when I was a child about walking down the church aisle to become a member of a community of believing Christians. I stepped onto the fast track to Christianity. I was baptized and became an active member of my local church; I accepted my call to ministry when I was twenty-seven years old.

At the time that God called me into the ministry, I hadn't talked to my mother in two years. That summer in 1998, two weeks before my initial sermon, I received a letter from my mother. It arrived in a long, thick envelope. I waited for days before I opened it, afraid to read what she had to say. From a lifetime of experiences with her, I knew that even at a distance her words had the power to harm me and to hold me back from being my best and most positive self. I made a decision designed to protect me against the possibility of hurt. I took the letter to church with me so that I would have the support of good friends when I read it. Following the worship service, I told a few friends who knew my story that I had received a letter from my mother. I asked them to sit

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with me. We sat on the pew directly in front of the altar. I did not know what to expect but, as it turned out, this letter was a wonderful surprise. My mother told me how much she loved me and talked about being proud that I had graduated from college and was doing so well. She told me that she had been drug-free for six months and was working to get her life together through a church drug rehabilitation program. The following were her exact words: “Son, I hear you about to become a preacher. I joined church and got baptized. I’ve attached a copy of my Bible study lesson with this letter and was hoping you would call and help me with it.” My mother’s letter blew me away. That this letter arrived two weeks before I was to preach my first sermon was the clearest sign from God that I had ever experienced. To show me the importance of my life’s calling, God had returned my mother to me.

Everything I do in ministry focuses on how to help those who have been kids like me—kids who are hurting or who have carried the pain of their childhoods into their adult lives. They may be kids (or adults) who believe there is a God but are not sure that God has anything to say that is relevant to their challenging lives. Like me, many people seek answers to the question, “Is there anyone in the Bible like me?” or “Can great Bible leaders like Moses, David, and Esther relate to my experiences and my pain?” The answer is yes! These Bible leaders often led very hard lives, making them just like us. Their stories illustrate the ways that their painful experiences are much like those that many of us have experienced or are now going through. Most important is that many figures in the Bible became leaders by turning their challenges

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into victories. Because God changes everything, leadership and victory are in each of us. Turn the page, and I'll show you the path that God has laid out for you in the stories of each of these at-risk youth in the Bible. See how God takes what looks like a mess and transforms it into something amazing — something we'll call *God's Graffiti*.