

## **Seasons with Christ**

**My journey from different to distinguished**

**Maretha Retief**

Smashwords Edition  
Copyright © 2014 Maretha Retief  
[www.seasonswithchrist.com](http://www.seasonswithchrist.com).  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are taken or paraphrased from The New King James Version® (NKJV). Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken or paraphrased from the New International Version®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com).

Scriptures marked NASB are taken or paraphrased from New American Standard Bible®. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. [www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org).

Scriptures marked MSG are taken or paraphrased from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Ebook formatting by [www.ebooklaunch.com](http://www.ebooklaunch.com)

## **Table of Contents**

**Dedication**

**Acknowledgments**

**Introduction**

**Chapter 1 - New Hope Amidst the Imperfections of Life**

**Chapter 2 - Dying to Self to Live in Christ**

**Chapter 3 - The Ebb and Flow of My Insecurities**

**Chapter 4 - Climbing My Mountain to God's Will**

**Chapter 5 - Seeds of Purpose**

**Chapter 6 - A Second Chance in God's Fountain of Grace**

**Chapter 7 - The Fruits of My Journey**

**Chapter 8 - Finding Love in God's Hand**

**Epilogue**

**Note from Author**

**Endnotes**

## **Dedication**

To my Father God: You know the reason for this book and the purpose You wish for it to serve. Let Your will be done. You are my beginning and end. You sustain me. Thank you for Your love and for never giving up on me.

To those who have made mistakes but had the courage to carry on and anyone who does not understand why things happen the way they do: this book is for you!

## Acknowledgments

There are so many people who have touched my life in a wonderful way. God knew exactly who I needed and when I needed each person to shape my life according to His plan.

I am grateful for my immediate family: my parents, Sakkie and Marietjie van Niekerk, and my elder brother, Sakkie and my younger brother Handré, who were always there for me through thick and thin. Even when all the odds were against me, you loved and supported me. Thank you for all you have sacrificed for me. I will always love and treasure you.

To my new extended family, my in-laws Apie and Carlien Retief, thank you for all the support and love. You are a gift from God.

To the love of my life and my best friend, Daniël, thank you for all your love. It makes me believe that I am destined for greatness. Thank you for your patience, guidance, and all your valuable inputs in my life and this book. I look forward to walking the rest of our journey together.

To everyone else who has walked with me in my journey with God, you know who you are, thank you for all the endless hours of conversations about Jesus and for sharing in my love for our Savior. Thank you for allowing God to use you for the amazing truths He opened my eyes to, guiding me into a deeper relationship with God, and being God's instrument to open my eyes to His grace and the position of rest I have in Him to live a victorious life. I will always be grateful for you.

To everyone who played a role in bringing this book into its final form, thank you for your valuable inputs and all your hard work. I appreciate everything you've done for me and could not have done this without you. Thank you!

## Introduction

Everyone has a story to tell. My journey includes many encounters with the seasons of life—summer, autumn, winter, and spring. Sometimes I experienced one season at a time, but often it was all seasons simultaneously.

My life has not played out the way I imagined it would. When I planned summers, life brought winters. When I thought I was ready for brighter times, life gave me a mountain to climb. Nothing could have prepared me for all the stones that life threw at me, stones with the potential of becoming destructive weapons or building blocks. The one thing that always kept me going was the knowledge that somewhere deep inside me, there was something bigger and better waiting for me. The present was not the end and will not be, even when this book's last page is turned.

Maybe you were not born with a disability but have experienced disappointment, failure, or hard times in your life. Maybe you have struggled with your self-esteem or had plans for your life that did not turn out as you anticipated. If so, come with me on this journey, and we will cross continents and jump over barriers that will inspire you to find your hope in Jesus Christ!

This is my story. At times it might seem very dark, but Hope kept me alive. The end is still in the hands of our Lord, Jesus Christ. I have walked through the valley of the shadow of death, but I have learned not to fear evil, for Jesus is with me (see Ps. 23).

Towards the end of this book, I share some lessons I learned during the course of my journey. My wish for you is that God will use those lessons to encourage you and this book to bless you. I hope you can take something from it that will help you grow and become a stronger and more fulfilled you. Come enjoy the journey with me!

*Personal prayer: Thank you Father that You changed me, my shortcomings, failures, disabilities, and disobedience into a goal for You. Thank you for helping me stay on Your path, even if I am so determined with my own plans, because I know my testimony means a soul for You. I know now what I said "yes" to when I accepted Jesus as my Savior was not my worldly medals but a crown in Your kingdom. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Chapter 1

### **New Hope Amidst the Imperfections of Life**

Now as *Jesus* passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:1-2)

I was born in South Africa, at six o'clock on a Monday morning, in the autumn of 1984, shortly after my dad rushed my mom to the hospital. Initially, nothing was noticed. It was only when the nurse inspected me and turned to say something to the doctor that my parents realized something was wrong.

The doctor informed them about my lobster hand. On my left hand, I had a pinkie and a thumb. Between them were only three little lumps of skin with nails—no fingers.

Surprise and then disbelief followed. My parents never expected anything like this. They were ready to see their perfect, little baby girl budding into life's garden. Instead, they suddenly had to revisit their definition of having a perfect baby (physically complete, with ten toes and ten fingers; mentally able; and intellectually strong).

Like any parents, they were excited about what my life might entail, but they were also scared of what was expected from them. No child comes with a manual on how to be raised, not even a disabled child. My parents tried their best to stay calm and held onto the promise of God in every child: that I would be very special, with talents and abilities that would make me remarkable. They knew this was a task they could not fulfill within their own powers and that they would need God's guidance.

My dad broke the news to our family and friends with a heavy heart, but during the process, he received an assurance in his heart that God would look after me.

While my mother and I were still in the hospital, an orthopaedic surgeon was asked to have a look at my hand. He took my hand, looked at it, and said, "Look at this pretty hand."

My mother was still in shock. She could not believe his words and said, "Are you mad?"

Without showing much emotion, he looked at her and responded, "Be grateful that there is nothing wrong with her mind."

She soon realized she had no idea what my disability might entail but that there was truth in his words.

Ten days later, my parents, hoping for some answers and guidance, took me to the same orthopaedic surgeon for a thorough inspection. Our visit gave them a new perspective. The doctor barely greeted my parents before he made it clear that if they had a problem with my hand, they were not welcome in his office.

My parents were offended at first, but the doctor quickly emphasized that my parents' acceptance of me was critical. They suddenly realized that they might have ended up at the right place. When the doctor provided an opportunity for them to find more reasons for my disability from another specialist, my father made it clear that it was not needed. My parents were desperate for answers, but they understood that none of them would change my situation.

Even though my parents made a choice to accept me, they still struggled to deal with

my disability and everything it might entail. Irrespective of their confusion and questions, they loved me and knew I was their miracle from God. In the midst of their turmoil of emotions, they were filled with strength and composure.

My birth was their spring. My new life was their autumn—a time of dying to expectations. But at the same time, it was an opportunity for the cultivation of a new spring of hope. They had to make a choice to support me no matter what the future might hold. My physical disability was never a reason to give up, but it gave them a reason to look up. They decided to trust God and raise me as normally as possible.

One day while my parents were attending church, the speaker spoke about the imperfections in life. In my mother's own attempt to try and understand how she was going to explain to me one day why this happened to me, she discussed her uncertainties with the speaker. His advice was not to say anything. When you look at a rose tree, you find that all the leaves are different—some are scraped, some are torn, some are broken. That is how people are; nobody looks the same. Sometimes things happen to people that leave a mark in their lives, but the tree is beautiful nevertheless.

Six months later, that autumn became my physical reality when a decision had to be made on whether or not to amputate the three little lumps. It was made very clear to my parents that there was no chance of any fingers developing from those lumps, and they would only be obstacles to me. After many consultations, they decided to proceed with the amputation.

Since I was so little, I had no idea about what was happening and did not lose any sleep over it, but it was one of the hardest decisions my parents had to make. They realized that the lack of a few fingers does not mean that a child cannot have a wonderful and fruitful life. But a summer painted with thunderstorms was set for my parents.

## Chapter 2

### **Dying to Self to Live in Christ**

Playing tennis with seven fingers? Is that even possible?

It was often said that I was born on a tennis court. I started playing tennis at the age of four, after racing around on the tennis court with my tricycle for many hours while my parents were coaching tennis or playing themselves. It was very clear that I had a surprising talent in tennis. Whenever my mother was coaching and I was nearby, I joined the group of players. I did not want to miss out. I wanted to play as often as possible. Very quickly, tennis became my happy place, where I felt I belonged.

I never saw myself as someone with a disability. Seven fingers felt normal—after all, it was what I was used to. There were many adjustments I had to make, consciously and subconsciously, to compensate for the fingers I did not have, but that never led me to think that there was anything wrong with me.

It helped that my parents never placed any emphasis on the fact that my hand was not perfect. They never showed any pity or allowed me to use it as an excuse. They helped me to cope with my hand whenever I had difficulty without making an issue of it. The focus was always on what I had, not on what I lacked. I was healthy. I had an amazing talent for tennis. And I had a healthy mind and a family that loved me and would always be there for me. My parents' support and attitude impacted the path that my life was going to follow; my lack of three fingers played no role.

When I was in kindergarten, I became aware of the seasons through which one's life goes, those seasons that bear no relation to the weather outside. I experienced how happiness catapulted into confusion and despair within moments.

At school, I was happy to be among other children and took part in all activities. I did not think I was any different from the others and was living to the full in my bubble of excitement. However, for the first time, others asked questions about my left hand: "Why do you only have two fingers?" I had no answer, except that I was born that way. In their brutal honesty, they mocked me about it. The harsh comments I received brought a sudden winter chill across my life. I had to deal with other children's views of me before I even formed an opinion about myself.

There were big play tunnels on the school playground, and whenever I felt threatened, I would play "hide and seek" by myself in the tunnels. Once I felt better, I would sneak back and blend into the games being played during break time without anyone noticing.

Even though I was puzzled by the mockery, whenever I found myself in the vicinity of a tennis court, I felt safe again. I could be myself, and that was okay.

I also had one good friend who never made me feel any less than who I was. My hand was never a problem for her. She showed me that not everyone can hurt me; there are people I can trust and feel safe with—true friends out of God's hand. It felt good.

After kindergarten, the mockery did not stop. At the age of seven, I went to primary school and was mocked from the first day. The other children did not understand why I looked different, and they made up their minds about me before they got to know me. They thought that there must be something wrong with me, and mocking was their way of dealing with it.

My parents always made a point of telling me how special and unique I was, so the fact that those children were making fun of me because of my different uniqueness was difficult to come to terms with. My initial ignorance of their cruelty was a blessing that minimized the damage of their words; however, it all caused me to want to know why I looked the way I did. I thought, *Why am I mocked? Is it so wrong to have only two fingers on one hand? Why do I have only two fingers and not five like the other children? Is there something wrong with me?*

For most of my time in primary school, my father was the principal at the school, which made it hard. I could never go to him about what was said about me, or I would be mocked as the girl who could not fight her own battles and always ran to her dad to cry. Even though there were times when I would have liked to do that, as the daughter of the principal, I knew it was different. I knew that if I did go to him, he would protect me each and every time, the best way he could, but these were things that I had to work out for myself.

I came to equate sharing with getting hurt, so silence seemed right. I just kept my emotions and thoughts about my hand to myself. Teachers would sometimes notice that something was wrong because of other children's comments or my reactions. But apart from encouraging words to me to not pay attention to the other children's comments, they didn't do much about it.

My hand became a weakness in the eyes of other children. My physical reaction to the mockery was hiding my hand whenever I came within the presence of children at school. Did I realize I was doing it? No, but subconsciously, my defenses were up.

My time in primary school was a constant battlefield. True friends were scarce, and I often felt like an outsider. I looked at other circles of friends and wondered what it must feel like to be part of them. But every time I considered it, I quickly retreated to my defensive thought process, where being alone seemed safer.

As I got older, the mockery became a form of intimidation. Others were trying to break me down emotionally. Comments became very personal, like the scorching sun burning down on me. I was constantly blown from one negative experience to the next. Other children, with the exception of a few friends now and then, were a threat to me. But I always found comfort in the fact that I had my parents and two brothers, who loved me and walked with me every step of the way. I was never any less than anyone else in their eyes. However, I did not share my feelings of hurt and insecurity with my parents, for fear that they might think they did something wrong.

Since I never shared my experiences with them, my parents had a hard time dealing with my situation at school. It was hard for them to understand what I was going through. They only found out about an incident if a teacher told them about it. They often spoke to me about my hand, but I never felt the need to ask questions or raise concerns.

My parents did share with me their uncertainties about why I was born without three fingers, and they had a tendency to blame themselves as they looked for the reasons. Still, they gave me every possible opportunity and supported me through everything I took on. I always appreciated that they never made a big deal out of my hand and treated me the same way they treated my two brothers.

Even though it appeared to most people that I was dealing with everything just fine, in reality, I did not know how to handle all the mockery. Still, as time went by, I learned to manage in my own way.

My mom always told me that I should not drop down to their level.<sup>[1]</sup> She said I should remain friendly, whether they deserved it or not. She thought that my showing them the better way to handle such situations would change their attitudes. It did not. Instead, the cruelty of their comments became worse. I do not regret trying to take the higher road at times when it would have been so much easier to take the quick way out by making comments back at them or going to teachers. It was hard, but doing the right thing did bring some liberty in the midst of my struggles.

Tennis remained a haven for me. All I wanted to do was play tennis. I played in provincial tournaments and had a lot of success starting when I was seven. I competed in the U/10 age group. At the time, I really did not understand the impact my tennis results had on me and the people around me, but the consequences thereof were soon revealed in another little mountain that made its appearance alongside mockery: jealousy.

Some of the girls I went to school with didn't like it when I did well in academics and tennis. Thus, I became the sounding board for their stormy and erratic thoughts of insecurity. Whenever I achieved results on the tennis court or in my schoolwork, they found a way to discredit them. My achievements soon became my enemies.

My mom always said that when friends act like that, you don't need any enemies. It made me feel better for a moment, but I struggled to understand their behaviour. I was very naïve to think that everyone would treat me the way my family did—supporting me and wishing me well. Still, my parents always taught me to wish others well, whether it was a friend or an enemy. I tried but soon realized I could not do it by myself, not with 100-percent pure intention, but if I asked Jesus, He helped me.

All the mockery and jealousy created in me a fear of socializing. It prevented me from sharing my life with others, since it always seemed like they judged me because of the way I looked. I felt more and more like an outsider and started to dread going to school. I always had to be ready for the next hail storm directed at me and wondered, *Why does it never stop? Am I doing something wrong? Is it so wrong to do well? Maybe it is because there is something wrong with me; otherwise, it would have stopped, wouldn't it?*

God sometimes poured down His blessing of friendship on me by sending a friend to comfort me. Even though I did not have many true friendships that lasted very long, the ones I had were gifts from God. I learned to be grateful for them. These were true friends, who rejoiced in my successes and stood by me during difficult times.

Still, I often caught myself wondering why things happened the way they did. *Am I the problem? Is it because of my hand?* I often thought that I was the only one who was dealt a "bad hand" in life, literally and figuratively, but when I looked around me, I noticed that there were many people who were struggling or fighting their own battles. Every person encounters his or her own winter at some point.

My mother often showed me people who had a disability or were going through hard times. I was made aware of how well they seemed to deal with them and how they did not allow them to ruin their lives. I became very grateful for the hand I had, even though it was not perfect, because it could have been so much worse. I realized that I never know enough of a person to judge him or her. There is always something influencing a person's behaviour, and instead of judging, I can try to understand each person as best as I can.

I decided that no matter what life throws at me, I can stand up against it and fight the courageous battle, because I am not doing it on my own. I am self-sufficient in Christ-

sufficiency.<sup>[2]</sup>

## **Growing Into Acceptance and Understanding**

The turning of winter into spring always brings about anticipation for new adventures and new life. A real turning point came for me at the age of eleven. It was the year in which a new dawn broke across my life's horizon. In the blink of an eye, I had to be a grown-up to make decisions that had a tremendous effect on my life.

The tone of acceptance was set when I paid my annual visit to the doctor for the examination of my left hand. I was informed that I had to undergo a big operation to extend the tendons in my pinkie, as well as a skin transplant to adapt to my hand's growth. It was the first operation when I was aware of what was going to happen.

In addition, I was given a choice: did I want a prosthesis for my hand? A customized prosthesis could be made and imported from the United States of America. The doctor said it would make my hand look "prettier" and my life easier as a young lady.

At first, I did not quite understand what he meant. So he tried to explain that when I got older, he did not want me to be any more affected by my hand than I already was. He said that if I wore a prosthesis, it would make my hand look normal and prettier, which should make my life as a young lady much easier.

I was completely caught off guard. I had never considered wearing prosthetics before. My emotions were caught up in an unexpected thunderstorm. *Why would I want a prosthesis on my hand? I have a healthy hand. Why do I need to put lifeless fingers on it? Jesus made me this way, so why do they want to change it? I do not need three extra fingers to make my hand look "prettier."*

I was very unhappy with the proposal and quickly rejected it. Without thinking further, I made it very clear that I was happy with the way my hand looked. I did not initially realize it, but that conversation led to a sudden, new, and deeper revelation about my relationship with Jesus and my acceptance of my disability.

I remember sitting on my bed that afternoon, after we got home from the doctor's. I revisited the appointment in my mind and made a conscious decision to say "good-bye" to the winter of insecurities and welcome a new season of life. I went down on my knees and prayed to Jesus, asking Him to come into my heart and make me His child. My imperfect birth as a baby was overtaken by the perfect birth<sup>[3]</sup> I received in the Spirit when I became a newborn child of God.

I was brought up as a Christian, but this was the first time it truly became my own heart's desire to be His child. My eyes were opened to the peace<sup>[4]</sup> I have in Jesus, irrespective of my physical shortcomings.

When the time arrived, I had my operation. They opened up my entire hand, from my thumb to my pinkie, to do the necessary work. It was extremely painful, and the recovery was challenging. It was my first encounter with physical pain, something I got acquainted with a lot more as time went on.

This time was also significant because it was the year I stopped allowing others to hurt me through their mockery and when I learned to ignore the devil's lie that my disability is who I am. I entered a fresh season with Jesus. I knew that the road ahead of me would not be easy, but I decided to turn every obstacle into a stepping stone. Just like a seed is planted and first has to die before something new can grow from it, I had to learn to put all my feelings of imperfection and my fears and doubts at the foot of the

cross before I could start growing as a new person in Christ.<sup>[5]</sup>

I accepted who I was and started talking to Jesus about everything on a continuous basis. It felt like He had taken my hand and was walking with me every step of the way. When I could not cope, I asked Him to help me. When I did not understand something, I asked Him to explain it to me or show me what to do. I found a lot more comfort in talking to Jesus than to people and knew that He would not use anything against me or hurt me. Whenever I spent time with Him, I ended up with a smile, just as if He made the sun shine upon my face.<sup>[6]</sup>

After I grew in my relationship with Jesus and accepted myself more and more as I was, I discovered that the mockery at school no longer hurt me like it did before. My winters were replaced with the hope of good things to come. Although the hurtful comments still had an effect on me, I managed to handle them much better. I kept reminding myself that Jesus loves me.<sup>[7]</sup> I often pictured myself in a green field, sitting on His lap, with Him holding me close and telling me, "I love you, my child!"

Outside of school, I had similar battles to fight on the tennis court. At first, I was admired for doing well with only seven fingers, but admiration soon turned into jealousy. The natural talent for tennis I have been blessed with did not come without challenges. Still, I was determined to be successful. I wanted to play among the best in the world, irrespective of my disability. I knew my hand could hold me back if I allowed it, but the decision was mine to make. I realized that if I could understand my victory over my disability with the help of Jesus and not allow it to hold me back, I would be okay. I urged myself on a daily basis not to give up and to look up to Him.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **Acceptance and Self-worth Through Performance**

I often thought, *I wonder if I will ever be good enough just being me? To what extent must I go to be accepted? Will good performances earn me acceptance with friends? I want to meet or exceed people's expectations.*

It was important to me to keep people happy, whether it was my parents, teachers, or a friend. I believed that I needed to earn acceptance. Tennis was my way of doing it. My self-worth was based on my performance and the way people reacted to it.

When I was twelve years old, I decided I wanted to play at Wimbledon. It was not a loud announcement to the world but a subtle decision I made. I considered it my way of proving myself to the world. It stirred the winds of excitement and purpose inside of me. I thought, *I believe I can do this. It would be the highest level I can go in tennis. I would be doing it against all odds.*

My decision impacted not only my life but also the lives of my entire family. Every day and every holiday (vacation) was scheduled around tennis. During school terms, I would go for a run every morning, often at the cost of my parents' sleep. If I could not find a partner to practice with, I would still do it on my own. It was never an option to miss a practice session. There were a lot of sacrifices to make, and my parents did everything they could to give me every opportunity possible.

During holidays, my elder brother also played in the tournaments. My younger brother kept himself busy next to the courts until he was old enough to play.

We were very fortunate to have a tennis court at home—a privilege I enjoyed as much as possible. My dad usually coached in the evenings after a day of work, but whenever I could see a gap, I would plead with my dad to come and play with me before

he had to switch off the lights. Even when he was tired, he was always prepared to hit a few more balls with me. I always considered him my favorite hitting partner. I always had perfect timing on my shots and played well when I was playing against him!

I developed a passion for the game that was hard to ignore. I wanted to do everything that was required to make my dream to play at Wimbledon come true. I felt I had a point to prove. It was not about what I had but what I did with what I had.

I quickly climbed in the national rankings and continued to be very successful on the tennis court, winning many tournaments and having unexpected wins over higher-ranked players. I enjoyed being successful and was motivated to reach for more.

Every day when I woke up, I filled my mind with motivating thoughts. I loved finding a Bible verse out of my "Bread of Life" box that spoke to me, and I would carry it around and remind myself of it the rest of the day.

My days did not proceed without challenges. With every good thing that crossed my path came an obstacle. The obstacles varied and included hand operations, the cruelty and jealousy of people, and health problems experienced as a result of compensating for my left hand. Again, I had a choice about whether to allow circumstances to be an obstacle or turn my obstacles into stepping stones. I had to choose to give everything to the Author of my life and let Him write His beautiful story about me.

My dream to go to Wimbledon had many elements—physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and personal. I often relied on self-help guidelines combined with self-effort to reach my goals. I worked extremely hard and was prepared to do anything that was required. I was prepared to make sacrifices at all costs, but I was unaware of the extent of those costs.

## Chapter 3

### **The Ebb and Flow of My Insecurities**

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5 NIV)

Choices bring outcomes. Outcomes build character. Character brings hope.

My dad was always my coach. But as a result of his busy schedule at school and my increasing demand for more time, a change was required. My parents took me to another coach, which seemed like the right thing to do at the time, even though my dad had his reservations. I had only one goal in mind, and that was to make my dream to play at Wimbledon come true. I was still very young but was ready to take on the challenge. My new coach knew how I felt and continually used it to motivate me.

In the beginning, everything went well. I learned how to read the game and the importance of fitness and mental training. Then as time passed and more important decisions needed to be made regarding the technical side of my game, things changed.

My dad did not always agree with the decisions my coach made. I was confused. It was my dad's advice versus my coach's advice. My dad was doing what he thought was best for me as my father. My coach was doing what she thought was best for me as my coach. I wondered, *Whose advice should I follow?*

My coach had a very dominating personality, and opposing her was never an option. An immediate fear took root in me. Initially, I thought it was respect I felt, but I soon realized it was something else. I tried to keep both my dad and my coach happy, irrespective of the conflicting advice they gave. But it reached a point where my confusion filtered into the way I played, and it produced negative results. I began to realize that I might not be at the right place, but instead of acting on my concerns, I kept them to myself—apart from the few times when I raised them at inappropriate times, when they had no effect.

I always took everything very seriously. I honestly believed my coach did what she thought was the best for me, but the emotional strain it put on me was tough. I now know that I should have acted upon my concerns. Fortunately, by God's grace, He came and used my circumstances as preparation for what was still to come.

Since I was only twelve years old, I did not realize how important nutrition was, especially with the long hours I had to train. So when my coach started telling me about it, I followed every single word of advice, right down to the letter. For example, when my coach told me to stop eating anything that contained sugar, I did. The explanation that I needed to keep my blood sugar levels consistent seemed fair.

Previously, I'd never had a problem with eating. I ate whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted to. But the negative effect it could have on my sugar levels made me change my mind. I immediately adjusted my eating habits by cutting out all food that contained sugar. I wanted to do anything that would help me reach my dream.

The limitations my coach set for me were meant for my own good and not to harm me, but the extremes to which I took them ended up causing me a lot of damage—

emotionally and physically. It really started when I was thirteen years old. At that time, I went on a coastal tour to Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and East London and lost five kilograms within a month.

My coach often checked up on me to remind me of what I should or should not eat, and I started to feel very insecure about my eating habits. I took it a little further with an all-or-nothing approach and refused to eat anything that I thought my coach would disapprove of. I did not realize the impact the next couple of years would have on my life and the picture I had of myself. My thoughts escalated to an evil cycle, in which food and outward appearances played the main role.

Initially, I did not make much of it. I enjoyed being skinnier, especially when people started to notice it. The players and their parents at the tennis court, my coach, and my parents kept on making comments about how good I looked and how much weight I had lost. It started to create the perception in my mind that the skinnier I became, the more acceptable I would be.

Soon my appearance changed, and I lost more weight. The more weight I lost, the more my personality changed. Instead of being a lively, normal thirteen year old, I withdrew and became more introverted and confused.

The constant controlling I experienced from my coach made me extremely nervous. My mom did not see the problem at first. I would often share my concerns with her, but she did not want to oppose my coach, as she thought my coach would do what is best for me. My dad, however, was very concerned.

I was left in a thunderstorm of confusion. I could not get out. My coach did not like the opposition from my dad and my support of his ideas. This resulted in her pointing to me as the one with problems. Then I became desperate to escape but had nowhere to go. All this could have been prevented had I acted on my concerns right away.

Soon I started to have trust issues. I thought, *Why all the pain? Why would my coach, who should have my best interests at heart, make things so difficult for me? Why does my mother not believe me? What am I doing wrong to deserve this?* I felt betrayed, became a lot more secluded, and withdrew from conversations. By choice, I did not involve myself in any social activities. I actually would avoid them on purpose, just so that I did not have to eat.

The perceptions I had of food became totally twisted. I started eating the bare minimum, only enough to allow me to go on with my daily routine. The less I ate, the better I felt about myself. Even though I felt drained of energy, it was not a good enough reason for me to eat more. Food was no longer something for me to enjoy; it was merely a means of survival.

I had heard many times about girls who became anorexic. I felt sorry for them and wondered what pushed them to that point. Little did I realize I was heading in the same direction.

Over time, I continued to keep myself from eating carbohydrates, fatty foods, and anything else I believed could make me fat. The more comments I received about my weight, the more I was motivated to lose even more. I no longer allowed my mom to dish up for me; I would do it myself, and the portions I ate became very small. I would even skip a meal unnoticed. I constantly said that I was full, even though I was not. I simply made myself believe that I was full. My parents became really concerned, but the more they asked me about what I ate or encouraged me to eat more, the more I got upset and

just stopped eating.

My eating habits were such an evil cycle, but I could not see that at the time. When I was asked questions regarding my habits, my answer would always be that they were the best for my tennis. I continued to withdraw from everyone. I said very little and no longer recognized myself in the mirror. I did not feel in control of anything, except the amount of food I ate. Nothing would enter my mouth unless I felt I could allow it.

Soon my appearance was no longer admired; instead, it attracted concern. Deep down inside of me, I knew I was busy destroying myself, but I did not feel the need to change my ways. Weight was becoming such an issue that it influenced my character.

Even though I did not allow myself to eat much, food was the only thing on my mind: *What did I just eat? What will I eat next? What will be the healthiest option? I do not want to be fat. What if I do get fat? I must make sure not to eat anything that could make me fat.* Thoughts about food consumed my entire being. It all started with a false image of appearances planted in my thoughts and was fed through circumstances and my false belief that the way I looked would make me more acceptable to others.

### **Showers of Negativity**

My thoughts and entire outlook on life left me empty inside. I was only fourteen years old and without hope. Depression had set in like dark clouds on the horizon of an approaching thunderstorm. I lost all confidence and trust in anything I did. I did not want to go on any longer. Suicide seemed worth considering. I thought, *Maybe it is better if I make an end to all of this. My family will be better off without me—less conflict. Will this dark cloud hanging over me ever go away? How did I get so far off track? Is it worth trying to get back on it?*

I constantly felt numb and tired. I lost not only my appetite for food but also for life. In order to protect myself, I blocked my emotions. Whenever something negative was said about me, I would immediately block it out of my mind in an attempt to limit the pain it caused. The darkness of depression consumed me.

I never spoke about things that bothered me, instead I would write poems to sort through my feelings. In a desperate attempt to make sense of all my confusion, I wrote the following poem:

#### **Self-destruction**

How come every time I look in the mirror I see a beast?  
Not once do I see a princess,  
armoured in beauty,  
created through love,  
perfectly designed to the taste of my Designer.  
How come I can never compliment myself?  
I destroy myself through devastating self-talk.  
I never seem to be satisfied.  
I constantly give credit to others,  
but not once can I give myself an "okay. "  
I hate the way I think about myself.  
I am on a self-destructive road from start to finish.  
I want to take care of people,

but I can't even take care of myself.  
I want people to like me,  
but I can't handle myself, never mind like.  
I want people to love me,  
but I can't love myself.  
I want to be satisfied with myself  
even if it is hard to love myself.  
Just satisfied, but where do I start?

For a long period of time, I looked for people and circumstances to blame for my unhappiness. I was not prepared to take any responsibility for the situation I was in. I was looking for answers in all the wrong places. I searched everywhere, except for the one place I should have.

The worst part of it all was that I was doing so much damage to myself. I set unreasonable standards that always left me feeling unfulfilled. Being ordinary was never good enough for me; I had to be exceptional and nothing less. Thus, I never felt good or skinny enough. There was always something missing, and I could only focus on the worst possible outcome for every situation.

### **An Encounter with God**

Despite all my negativity, God never gave up on me. He promises in Hebrews 13:5, "I will never leave you, nor forsake you."

At the age of fourteen, I was elected for the U/14 team to represent South Africa at the World Cup in Nagoya, Japan. I was very excited, but at the same time, I was a little scared of what it might entail. I'd been on tennis tours to Australia, France, Italy, and Africa, but this one was different.

Before I left, I prayed and asked God to be with me and give me the peace I needed to perform to the best of my ability. It turned out to be the best tennis tour I ever experienced, not because of anything that happened on the tennis court but because of what God did through me during that time.

The foundation was laid when I got in the back of the car for my father to drive me to the airport. As we left, my mother saw two big men in white clothes sitting next to me. An undeniable peace embraced her. She did not say anything at the time. It was only after I came back from my tour and told her about everything that happened that she remembered and told me that she saw them and had been filled with peace at the time.

From the very moment that I set foot off the plane, the battles began. These were mental and emotional battles that went on throughout the tour, among the players and our team members. I realized that there was only One whom I could trust no matter what, and that was Jesus.

As a result of all the different languages that were spoken among the players of the participating countries, there were interpreters who could help players communicate when they experienced difficulties. At that time, I did not speak English very well, so I started reading my Bible in English in an attempt to improve.

One day, as we left the courts to go back to the hotel, one interpreter came to sit next to me in the bus. She noticed I was reading my Bible and started asking me questions about Jesus. She had heard of Him but did not really know Him. In my broken English, I started sharing with her everything I knew about Jesus. I told her He is God's beloved

Son, who died for my sins and rose from the dead, and He took all my sins, sicknesses, and weaknesses on Him and suffered for them. I explained that it is because of His death and resurrection that I am able to live my life today. Then I said that Jesus loves me so much that He would have done that for me, even if I was the only person on this earth. I told her that the same was true for her.

While we were talking, an undisputable presence of Light embraced us, as if we were the only two people in the bus. I did not notice anybody else. I was filled with peace. It was then that I saw for the first time what it looked like when Jesus personally comes and touches somebody's spirit and heart.

The interpreter became quiet and noticed my left hand. She could not understand how I was so comfortable with it. I explained to her the good things that God had done for me and the wonderful things I'd received in life, irrespective of my hand, and what I experienced because of it. She was moved deeply, in such a way that it could only have been made possible by God.

A little while later, she told me that she wanted to give her life to Jesus. I was so happy. No victory on any tennis court could ever compete against the joy I had in my heart for her at that very moment. She was a new believer in Jesus!

As I stepped off the bus, I felt God urging me to give her my Bible. Without any questions, I gave her my Bible and left with a smile. It was as if I was the one who saw the Light for the first time. And, in a way, it was; it was the first time I experienced the presence of God on such a personal level. I did not think anything could get any better, until a few days later.

It was the opening match of the World Cup, and we were playing against the United States of America. I had to play the opening singles match. I was still very skinny, and my weight was a concern for many. I lost the first set 2-6. I was very nervous and started praying, asking God to please calm me down and play through me. I needed His help. I could not do it by myself; the moment was too big for me.

I started playing better and won the second set 6-2. After a lot of heat, sweat, and struggling, I was down 3-5 in the third set, when I fell. I got up, and I could feel myself walking and playing tennis, but it was almost as if I were watching myself play. I could see myself playing all those perfect shots. It felt like I was in a bubble. I did not notice anybody around me. It literally felt as if the Holy Spirit came and played through me. That was when I remembered that it was exactly what I asked God to do. I won the match 2-6, 6-2, 7-5.

When I shook my opponent's hand at the net, I knew the victory was not mine but God's. I did not win my match that day because of my own strength or abilities but because of the strength and grace God gave me.

From that time on, I knew I could trust in God, even though I did not immediately realize the full meaning of what had happened to me. I knew He would always be there for me, no matter how small or big my situation was.

Our team eventually took third place in the World Cup—job well done. Nevertheless, that bronze medal could not give me the joy or peace those moments with God gave me. It was a stepping stone to the next level God had in store for my life.

After I returned home from the tour, God helped me to reflect on everything that happened, and He opened my eyes to see how His presence had been with me every step of the way.

## **Dark, Gloomy Moods**

Even after a wonderful World Cup tour, I was once again caught up in the darkness of depression. I hated it. I did not want to be in it and wanted to get out, but the darkness kept on pulling me back. I tried to hide it, but it was consuming me from the inside.

The situation with my coach got worse, and I wanted to run away from my own life. Suicidal thoughts appeared again, and although I came very close, I could not do it. This time, there was Opposition. A small, still Voice inside me told me it was not the way for me: *"Maretha, you are not a coward. I am the way, follow Me, I will never leave you. It takes more guts to stay in this life. I am not done with My plans for you. I have only started."* The more I thought of taking my life, the more I was reminded of the love of God.

While I was standing in the kitchen one afternoon, considering my options, I physically felt God embracing me with His arms, and I knew there was no turning back. I had to live. I knew that no darkness could ever overshadow the light of Jesus. First John 1:5 says, "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all."

Below is the poem I wrote about the thoughts I had when I considered suicide. I presented an argument of God's light in my life to force myself to make a choice.

### **To Make a Choice**

I think I came to the end of my road.  
I cannot go on anymore, I have had enough.  
I do not feel like going on,  
I want to call it quits.  
Now, I have a choice to make—  
I can stop and make an end to it all.  
I feel like a failure.  
I can search for a new road to follow,  
the one I was meant to be on.  
God will never send something my way  
for which He did not already provide the outcome.  
It is not my choice to decide that I am finished;  
with all my duties on earth,  
and on my way to rest in a "false" peace.  
It is God's decision, not mine.  
God will not leave me on earth if He does not need me here.  
I still have a purpose to fulfill.  
People need me, I cannot go—  
I have to stay, I need to stay!  
I am in a dark, discouraging, and frightening time,  
but no darkness is so great that a light cannot shine through it.  
Nothing is so frightening that God cannot give me comfort.  
Nothing is so discouraging that Help cannot get me through.  
I should hang in there; for every dark moment,  
there is a light coming up that will show me the way.  
The light of God!

Swallowing my pride was the hardest thing for me, but I had reached a point where I wanted more in life. I had to accept that something needed to change so I could become the person God wanted me to be. I tried many self-help books to overcome my depression, but I could not change myself. I needed God to help me. He was the only One who could bring everlasting change in my life.

God started changing something inside me. It was not easy. I had many internal battles, battles against my flesh. And I found many reasons why I should go back to my old ways of comfort. However, I had an undeniable inner peace. God was raising me up for my next level in life.

Every time that I lost hope and felt weak, God strengthened me. He promises in His Word that whenever I am weak, He is strong.<sup>[9]</sup> Therefore, I realized I never had a reason to be discouraged in the face of trials, because in my weaknesses, God's strength was made perfect.

Whenever I tried to change something for the better, the devil did his best to convince me that nobody would accept me or the change was not for my own good. He put every reason why I should not do it in front of me, with good examples to prove his points. However, nothing that happened to me led me away from God; rather, it created a deeper hunger in me to seek Him more. My only responsibility was to continue believing in God.

My taking everything one day at a time helped to keep my journey from becoming too overwhelming. I concentrated on the task at hand and let the result look after themselves. There was no point in worrying about tomorrow and what it might bring, as God only gave me enough grace for each day.<sup>[10]</sup>

I learned that any good change comes with patience, perseverance, and character. When God brings a change into a person's life, it does not mean that there will be no mountains to climb or storms to walk through. What it does mean is that while a person is climbing the mountain or walking through the storm, God is right there containing the person in peace. God already provided for every breakthrough and victory in His presence. The result on the other side is worth every bit of the hardship along the way.

I wanted to have a great life, without issues. How, I did not know, but I was prepared to hang around and see what God had in mind. I did not have all the answers for my problems, but I knew that I was not alone. I had God.

## Chapter 4

### **Climbing My Mountain to God's Will**

When I was fifteen, I wondered, *Who am I? Who do I want to be? Who do people expect me to be?* I was ready to walk away from tennis, but my dad stepped in and decided I needed a change in scenery: a new tennis coach. Initially, I did not like the idea. I thought my parents were fighting a losing battle if they expected a new coach to change my mind about tennis. But a surprise was awaiting me—a wave of positivity for which my negative mindset was no match.

A new season came into my life, a time of new hope that was filled with spurts of growth. Just a few days of training with my new coach made an enormous impact on my life. The focus became all the positive aspects of me and my game: the strengths of my game, my mental toughness, the successes that I had so far, and the potential I still had in me. And I was surrounded by players who were motivated by similar dreams to mine. Within a couple of weeks, I let my guard down and shared in the positive self-talk and attitude of those around me.

My performance improved on the tennis court, and I quickly reached new heights. New heights also brought new challenges within me. There were times I had to deal with pride. There were more than enough worldly reasons to have pride, but the choice was mine to entertain it or not. Humility became a conscious decision after every victory—a continuous battle not to take the credit after a good performance.<sup>[11]</sup>

I learned the impact of my thoughts on my life. My thoughts became my words and actions. I also became more sensitive to the words I spoke and what I did; I was busy predetermining possible outcomes.

At last I had entered an environment that breathed new air into my life. It was hard to believe that I was living the same life as a couple of months before. Everything had completely turned around. I was happy again. I was no longer merely surviving but thriving. And my eating habits were in better shape.

I was determined to revisit my goal to play at Junior Wimbledon and worked even harder than before to make up for any lost time. I embarked on a journey that entailed a search for the positives in life. I worked hard on my fitness levels. I was not the biggest or strongest player on the court, so I had to make up for it in other ways. But I had fun doing it. Even though training sessions were hard, I viewed everything I did as an investment toward my ultimate goal.

My body was strained by all the training. I never knew how to stop and was continuously pushing myself harder. In truth, I never saw the value of rest; thus, I was not consciously aware that my body needed a break.

I had to undergo an operation on my left hand almost every two years so the doctors could do the necessary "maintenance" work to keep up with the growth and development of my hand. My hand often required skin transplants to ensure enough movement and strength. Every operation brought about much needed rest periods of six to eight weeks—rest I never wanted but desperately needed.

### **A Shadow of Happiness**

I was fast on my way to qualifying for Junior Wimbledon. I literally ate, slept, breathed, and lived tennis. I willingly sacrificed most of my youth for it. I worked hard to make up for the deficit in my body and enjoyed the sport so much that I did not feel deprived of life at any time.

I always observed other players and learned never to take my natural talent for granted. It was a gift from God that had to be treasured. My talent was only a seed planted in the garden of my life, and how it got watered and fertilized determined its growth and whether or not it would bloom.

Still, I never used my name, talent, power, or position to intimidate other players. I felt that the only intimidation should be the quality of my game. Merely focusing on my game and being less worried about my intimidation ability paid off.

However, in the midst of the good times, there were often challenges to face. Tennis taught me to be adaptable in different situations. Perfect conditions were scarce. If I had to wait for everything to be perfect, it probably never would have happened. There was often something that did not go according to what I had planned, and I had to find a way to work around it.

For example, my left hand forced me to adapt on a regular basis. Whenever I had spasms, exhaustion, or pain as a result of the strain my hand took from the training, I had to adjust my game to lift the pressure off my hand. It always happened during important matches; I was forced to play with only one hand on numerous occasions. Fortunately, I am right-handed, so I only used my left hand on my backhand and to throw up the ball when I was serving.

My parents taught me that the best way to handle these situations was to play "mind over matter"; concentrate on the things I could control and accept the things out of my control. My own situation was never as perfect and comfortable as I wanted it to be, but I decided to capitalize on the parts that were working for me.

I never used my hand as an excuse for poor performance. Instead, I worked harder on my footwork, speed, strength, and consistency on the court. I wanted to improve so that the part of my body that did have a slight shortfall could not stop me from reaching my full potential. I trained five to seven hours a day, but my passion for tennis never faded. The more I trained, the happier I was. I felt more myself while I was playing tennis than doing anything else. However, the happiness I felt was only temporary.

I tried to find my peace and purpose in life through my tennis, instead of finding it in God. I thought I could earn happiness, but the kind of happiness that I was experiencing was more a fleeting, worldly satisfaction than the true joy God had in store for me. Yet I was under the impression that what I was feeling was something of substance.

Because I believed it was God's plan for my life, I wanted to be successful in tennis. But I had placed myself in God's position as the builder of my house instead of allowing Him to build it to His liking.<sup>[12]</sup>

My walk with God had many ups and downs. Whether or not I spent time with Him all depended on how I felt. I did not talk to God when I did not feel well or felt guilty about something I did. I believed the lie that I could not go to God because of what I did, even though God wanted to help me pull through. A person cannot wait to feel perfect or "holy enough" before spending time with God. It will never happen.

I had to learn not to focus on my love and feelings toward God but on His love for me, as it is always consistent and never changes. My feelings and emotions fluctuated,

but God's love for me is always the same, and He is the only one who always gives me a feeling that it is worth living, no matter how unworthy I feel or how dark my circumstances are.

As time passed, my game continued to improve, and so did my national and international rankings. I worked harder and practiced longer hours. I was wearing myself out, instead of building myself up. I always struggled to keep balance in whatever I did. While my performances excelled on the tennis court, I could not always say the same for my relationship with God, my family, and my friends. I was seriously committed to my sport, and it was easy to neglect aspects of my life that were truly important. Somehow I lost perspective on things.

I did not listen to the messages my body sent me because I believed that managing pain and tiredness was a requirement for being successful. In my mind, there was no room for weakness. I did not see anything wrong with the sacrifices I made to achieve a goal I thought God had for me. Thus, I pushed myself beyond my limits in every aspect of my training. My parents and coach often told me to relax more and work less, but since I enjoyed what I was doing, irrespective of the pain accompanying it, I did not stop. What I thought was best for me, in the end, proved to be a recipe for disaster.

Even though I performed well, I struggled with believing in myself. I never felt good enough, no matter how high my ranking was in tennis. I underestimated my own worth to a point of destruction. Every time I walked out onto the court, I was filled with self-doubt, until I actually won the match. My strong mind and willpower did not guarantee that I felt good about myself.

My continuous low self-esteem walked hand in hand with stormy emotions. They played a big role in my tennis. At first I would experience what some people might call a "four-seasons-in-one." During a practice session or match, I would embark on a rollercoaster of emotional ups and downs. One moment I would have a very calm state of mind, and the next, I was in a state of utmost turmoil. It did not always reach the surface, but on the inside, the waters were stirring. When I was playing well, I would feel good about myself. When I was not playing well, I would feel worthless. It was as if I had lost my ability to think rationally about myself and to put distance between the results of my game and who I was as a person.

I had to learn to be happy in spite of my circumstances and not because of my circumstances. Being happy was a choice, not a result.<sup>[13]</sup> I had to learn that what I did on the tennis court did not define me as a person. Eventually, I learned to create my own summers in whatever situation I found myself. The ability to enjoy life and everything in it is a gift from God that should not be taken for granted, and I had to make a choice to stop allowing circumstances to determine my self-worth and mindset.

## **Fears**

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. (2 Timothy 1:7)

My performances were exceeding all expectations, but a dark and gloomy cloud was hanging over me during competitions. They triggered the emotions of fear inside of me. Even though I had the guts to fight all things out until the end, the fear of disappointment, which is nothing other than insecurity, was never too far behind.

Because of my insecurities, I allowed fear to affect my approach to different

situations and sold myself short. Fear brought unnecessary doubts. For example, I would be in a good position in a match, but the fear of losing would cause a turn in my performance that led to unnecessary challenges. I would be calm in a situation, but as soon as I allowed myself to consider all the possible outcomes, it changed the flow of everything. I knew that it only took one point to turn a match around, just like it only takes one word to change a conversation.

I never had any bad losses on the tennis court, but by allowing fear to have a say made my life more difficult at times. It created unnecessary struggles that could have been prevented.

One fear I had to deal with was the fear of failing others by not meeting their expectations. I also feared that I would not be meeting my own expectations. I have never been a quitter, and I always tried to keep other people happy, but it only brought about more pressure and the fear of disappoint. Pressure for other players came mostly from their parents or coaches, but my pressure came from me. I have always set very high standards for myself and was never satisfied with anything less than the best. There was no "in-between" for me. When I set my mind on a goal, it was not negotiable—whether I succeeded or failed.

When I failed, I was devastated. In my mind I created an impression that I disappointed everybody who ever believed in me. I could not accept that they would be happy with me unless I was successful. The truth was that they still loved me, no matter what I did. But I thought that in order to be accepted or regarded as being good enough, I had to perform above expectations. Ordinary was never an option.

Every time I tried to keep people happy, I was miserable. After many failed attempts in my tennis and in my relationships with friends and family, I realized I was missing the point. I made decisions based on my perceptions of what people thought, decisions that did not result in the desired outcome. I needed a better perspective.

My results on the tennis court and at school portrayed a different story than the feelings I experienced. While a struggle about who I was, who I wanted to be, and who I thought other people expected me to be raged within me, my tennis results improved every day and my school work was far above average.

It was difficult for me to utilize my right to ignore the opinions of others. I often sought counsel, but the responses were never the same. For every ray of sunshine one could see, another overshadowed it with clouds of darkness.

I always wanted to know from my parents and coach whether or not I played well enough. Their opinions were fundamental to me. The problem was that I wanted to please people and God at the same time. By being a people pleaser, I was getting tossed and turned by the winds of people's opinions. Instead, I needed to become a God pleaser.<sup>[14]</sup> As Colossians 3:23-24 instructs, "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ."

All those times when I was entertaining fear in my mind, I was, in fact, reasoning with the devil, as fear originates from him. Over time, I realized that the devil was planting lies in my mind. Then I was able to address them and send them right back where they came from.

Nothing good comes from fear, and most of the things I feared never happened. I realized I had so many good things that helped me move forward in life that it was not

worth wasting a second of my time on something that was not good. So even though my mind was a battlefield of fears and doubts, I did decide not to act on my fears so that they would have no power.

### **Run-up to Junior Wimbledon**

A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps. (Proverbs 16:9)

In 2001, at the age of seventeen, I qualified for Junior Wimbledon. At the time, I was in the Top 50 of the U/18 category in the world. I received a main draw entrance, which meant I did not have to play qualifying rounds.

In March of 2001, a week before I had to leave for Asia for tournaments in final preparation for Junior Wimbledon, a sudden storm arose on the horizon. One afternoon while practicing, I hit a ball and felt excruciating pain in my right wrist. It was so bad I could not hold my racquet.

My mom immediately took me to the doctor to find out what was wrong. He confirmed that I had chronic tendinitis in my right wrist. Prior to this, my parents and I never knew I had any problems with my right hand. Our focus was always on my left hand.

This was the first time we were confronted with the possibility that I might not be able to go to Junior Wimbledon. My tendinitis was serious enough to prevent me from going overseas, but I did not want to hear anything about that. I reasoned, *I have worked so hard for this dream to come true. I do not want to miss out. My hand cannot be that bad. I am not going to let it stop me.* I liked the verse in James that says, "Knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:3-4).

I struggled to wait for God's answers and would rush in and make things happen before their destined time. Thus, I indirectly created outcomes that were never part of God's plan for me.

During that season, I often played while injured at important events. Coming from South Africa, I did not get that many opportunities, so when I did, I wanted to make the most of them. I wanted to see what I have worked for. I wanted to go to Junior Wimbledon more than anything in the world!

I went to Asia. I was on chronic pain medication to suppress the pain, but I still had pretty good results, reaching semi-finals and finals. But with each match, I could feel reality kicking in—my right wrist just got worse. I made a decision not to focus on or show my pain, even though it was of a much more serious nature than I realized. Also, the strain on my left hand was extensive, as I was compensating for the pain in my right hand.

I had some great victories over higher ranked players, but that was the extent of my wins. In one of my matches, I played against a top-seeded player of the tournament (the same girl who won Junior Wimbledon a little later that year). I knew she was the favorite to win our match and was already struggling with my right wrist. I knew I needed to stop, but I wanted to see how I could do against her.

I quickly fell behind in the first set and was trailing 2-5. On the change-over, I knew I had to calm down. I was losing the match in my mind before I was even giving myself a chance to win it on the court. It occurred to me that my hand could be an easy excuse to get out of the match. However, in the end, I decided it was not an option. Instead, I asked

Jesus to ease my pain and give me the peace and strength to complete the match for His glory. I relaxed and started playing better. I won the first set 7-5.

Once I started thinking about the fact that I was busy beating a top-seeded player, my insecurities crept back in, and I was down again 2-5 in the second set. So on the change-over, I revised my situation. My hand was in severe pain, and I knew that the only way I could finish the match was if I received help. I settled down, prayed to Jesus, and asked His help again. I forgot all about my fears and won the match 7-5, 7-5.

Everyone was very impressed by my performance that day, but the biggest victory I had was the one in my mind, through the help of Jesus. I knew He never left me and was by my side throughout my match, but I also had to choose to no longer entertain the negative thoughts of defeat but rather welcome positive thoughts of victory.

Something my mom taught me as a little girl will always stay with me. She taught me that whenever I go onto the court to exercise or I play a tennis match or I write a test, I must do it for the glory of God. As Colossians 3:17 states, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

It was only by God's grace that I was able to do what I did, so if there is anyone or anything that I must boast in, it should be the Lord. I needed Him for everything I did. It always amazed me how God honored it when I played or did something for His glory. I never had to deal with any bad losses but rather performances exceeding expectations, especially my own.

I no longer doubted my abilities on the tennis court, but as the tour progressed, I started to question whether or not tennis was really for me. I thought, *I have an amazing talent. I love the game more than anything. My parents sacrificed so much for me to be able to play tennis. I have had a lot of success, but was it worth all the pain? My body's limitations are costing me dearly. There was not a year where I did not have to sit out for a couple of months to recover from a hand operation, and I always had so much pain to cope with. Is this really for me?*

I could not understand why an obstacle always appeared and delayed my progress when things were going well. As soon as I recovered and prepared myself for another attempt, the next obstacle would cross my path.

Eventually, the pain in my right wrist became too much to play with, and I had to cut my Asian tour short. Upon my return to South Africa, I planned to take part in a senior tournament with the hope of finishing my preparation. I played a couple of matches, but unsurprisingly, my right wrist forced me to withdraw again.

On the day I withdrew from the tournament, while I was sitting by myself, assessing my situation, a lady I'd never seen before came and sat next to me. Her words to me were, "Maretha, tennis is not your purpose in life. God has something else for you, something even better than tennis."

Deep down inside of me, I knew she was confirming a feeling I had been dealing with for a while, but it still did not feel like the time or place to act on it. I knew my time as a tennis player had come to an end, but I was still too scared or proud to admit it or say much about it.

I questioned the "perfect plans" I had for myself and whether or not they were really what God had in store for me. I wondered if I was chasing after a dream that was not God's dream for me. I always thought it was God's plan for me because, after all, He gave

me the talent and my performances exceeded everyone's expectations. I could not imagine my life without tennis. Up to that point, everything revolved around tennis. When people thought of me or spoke to me, tennis was the only subject at hand.

I started on a new journey, during which God dealt with me in a different way, on a different level. He was opening my eyes to other avenues of life. It all made me realize that maybe there was another path in life set aside for me.

In the end, I decided to continue with my plans to go to Junior Wimbledon. I had several visits to the doctor, and the reports continued to be discouraging. We finally concluded that my hands were not getting any better and I should go and see what I had worked so hard for. There was no guarantee that I would get an opportunity to return the following year.

It was during the couple of weeks prior to Junior Wimbledon that I realized I am not the Author of my life. I can do whatever I want, but I do not have the last say. God will ultimately have the final say, and the sooner I accept it the better. I was not quite at the point of making this truth my own. These thoughts were mere seeds planted, and over the next couple of years, God made sure His rain of wisdom watered them.

In the midst of all the events surrounding my tennis, my school work required a new plan of action. I had been away from school a lot and kept my work up to date while travelling overseas, but the amount of time out of school forced us to consider home schooling. At first I was not so sure, but I always liked working by myself. And tennis had helped me to be very self-disciplined, so my parents were not concerned that I would not do my work.<sup>[15]</sup> Unfortunately, my self-discipline was often unknowingly running on the edge of self-destruction, as I was allowing myself very little time to relax.

My parents and I thought it best that I start home schooling in the middle of my eleventh-grade year. The aim was to still finish school with my year group at the end of 2002. I took it very seriously and worked hard from seven o'clock in the morning until two o'clock in the afternoon. I allowed myself very few breaks because, in my mind, it was my responsibility to learn in order to finish school. It helped me to put my focus on something other than tennis and all its uncertainty.

## **Junior Wimbledon**

Commit your works to the LORD, and your thoughts will be established. (Proverbs 16:3)

Wimbledon represents the idea of achieving the ultimate goal, the chance of a lifetime. For me, it was a time and place that should have represented the summer of my life, filled with lots of potential and achievements, but it eventually proved to be my wintertime. It became the time when I had to face reality and make some important decisions.

When I arrived in England, I did not know what to expect and was very uncertain of myself. Although my performance was at a level high enough to compete with the best in the world, I lacked the enthusiasm. It was ironic that my uncertainty was so strong at the point in time when my performance was at the highest level of the game and I was at the most famous tournament ... Wimbledon.

I wondered, *What am I going to do with my hands? Will I be able to play a match? What if the pain is too much? Even if I do well in the tournament, what am I going to do after that? My hands are not coping.*

I asked God for help. And I could feel that it was definitely a time and place where God was going to get my attention. Ignoring Him was no longer an option. I was experiencing erratic emotions, uncertainty, and emotional and physical pain. I did not know what to do. I wanted to run away.

During the day, when I was with my father and the other players, I could not show them how I felt inside. I put up a strong appearance, but on the inside, I was falling apart. No matter what I tried, I could not get things to change.

One afternoon, while I was sitting with my father in the players' lounge, he became quiet, looked at me, and said, "This is not for you; you do not belong in this world. You will definitely not compromise what you believe in, but maybe there is something else for you. You just do not seem to fit in." The reality and truth in his words stayed with me for a long time after that conversation.

The day came when I had to play my first-round match. I was nervous, excited, and scared—all at once. I did not know what to expect, but I was ready to find out. My match was scheduled for Court 16, also known as the graveyard of the seeds. I decided to go on the court and give it my best shot, irrespective of my unstable emotions and the pain in my right wrist. It was my final test.

As I stepped out onto the court, the atmosphere, the crowd, and the entire experience were amazing. It is hard to explain, but one thing is for sure, it was a feeling worth having for that moment in time! The excitement of the crowd and the intensity of the moment overwhelmed me. I managed to settle down and focus on the task at hand. At that moment, I realized that I was busy living my dream and should enjoy it.

The match had barely started when I felt a severe, sharp pain exploding through my right wrist. I knew things were wrong, seriously wrong, but I was not going to show it. And I was definitely not going to stop. I put some extra strapping around my right wrist and prayed to God to help me bear the pain. Winning was no longer the issue. I knew it was over, but for one last time, I was going to give it my best.

It started raining, and play was suspended. I could see my dad was also frustrated because of the situation. I was emotional, and he tried to motivate and support me, but there was very little that could be said. As much as I was living my dream, I knew I had to bid it a sudden farewell. I went back onto the court, and my final effort was impressive enough to fill the stands. I received a standing ovation, but it was not good enough for me to pull through to the next round.

The outcome made it clear that my time playing tennis was over. Just about nothing in that lifestyle could fascinate me anymore—the stress, the pressure, the competition. No matter how hard I tried to fight against reality, the soft Voice inside me was whispering (although it felt more like shouting), *"It is time to stop!"*

When children came to me after the match and asked for my signature, I was surprised. I always thought I would have a feeling of accomplishment when I gave my signature to others, but there was nothing. My only hope was to touch at least one person who watched me play. That would make it all worthwhile.

My time at Wimbledon did not turn out the way I imagined; in fact, it turned out to be the opposite. But in retrospect, I have learned many lessons I am grateful for today. Even though I know it was not God's plan for me, He still granted me the desires of my heart and let me play on the courts of Wimbledon, even if it was only for a few moments. He used it to get my attention and lead me into His will for my life.

God was never surprised by my problems or mistakes, and each of them evaporated in His presence. In every stage of my life, the one thing that stood out to me was that I could do nothing without Jesus. I thought I had the know-how, the power, and the gifts to do things, but it did not take me very long to realize that it had nothing to do with my abilities and everything to do with God's will for me.

Coming to the realization that my will does not compare to God's will for me brought the course of my life to a sudden standstill. The fight to stay with what I wanted faded with each step I took. I wrote these words to express my understanding that there is one way and it is with Jesus:

**One to be for ...**

I was walking down the corridor,  
knocking on every door,  
but none of them opened.  
Somewhere I heard a soft Voice calling me.  
I felt a Hand pulling me away.  
Somewhere I heard a soft Voice speaking to me.  
I have tried so many things, but I always failed.  
Every time I tried something, Someone was holding me back.  
Someone was trying to give me advice,  
If I had only listened, but who was it?  
Who could have known what is better for me—  
it was Jesus and still is.  
He is the key to the closed door,  
His will is the race we should run.  
He is the examiner, and we write the test—  
The only way to pass is through Him

## Chapter 5

### **Seeds of Purpose**

After Junior Wimbledon, I had to answer a question: Who or what is priority in my life? Tennis had always been my life, and it was hard to accept the reality that my tennis career had come to an end. I felt empty inside and like a failure.

I soon had to undergo an operation on my right wrist to repair the ruptured tendons. Then two more operations followed—a skin transplant on my left hand and further work on the bones in my right hand. I was unable to play tennis for eighteen months.

However, tennis was no longer my priority; I needed to finish school. I spent most of my time studying. But it was challenging to stay on track with my work while I was recovering from my operations because I had difficulty writing. I was overwhelmed.

In the midst of all the turmoil, I tried to understand why everything turned out the way it did. Depression took hold of me. I had no idea where my life was heading. I was so confused. The whole picture I had of my life was shattered into pieces.

I had never been an emotional eater; rather, I was an emotional non-eater. I usually stopped eating when I was nervous because I found my comfort in the absence of food. However, at this stage of my life, I reached a point where I hoped that food would fill the emptiness in my being. I thought that if I ate, it would make me feel better, but it didn't. I just felt worse. Guilt soon overtook me, and I allowed bulimia to sneak in through life's back door. I felt that I had to punish myself for not listening to the warnings to stop playing tennis that I'd received. I believed my stubbornness was the reason why tennis was no longer a part of my life.

In the eyes of those around me, I was always considered successful. Now that I no longer had the success of my tennis, I felt empty. I could no longer think anything positive about myself, and my mind became occupied with food. I knew my newly found habits were not the answer to my problem, and I felt so ashamed of myself. I was doing something that I never thought I would do, and no matter how hard I tried to stop, I could not get myself to do it. It was like I was trapped in a strong current. I tried to focus on my school work to keep my mind off food, but it was always a challenge.

Towards the end of my grade twelve year, I received a phone call from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, in the United States of America. They offered me a tennis scholarship. At first I was very excited, but the reality of my hands soon dimmed my mood. I wanted to go and see if I could maybe have one last chance at tennis. Even though my hands were not well, I was afraid to miss out on a great opportunity.

My dad was not in favor of the idea. He tried to reason with me, but my mind was made up. He knew I was old enough to make my own decisions, so irrespective of his concerns, he supported me. Thus, after I finished school, I went to Virginia, but my hands barely lasted three months.

I attempted to stay a little longer and see if I could find another way to make it work. I tried coaching tennis, but my hands could not deal with all the playing. Then the reality that I had to step away from tennis became more apparent. I realized that it was time for me to open my eyes and grow up, to leave tennis behind and start a future without it.

After spending some time with my uncle and his family in America, I returned to South Africa to start studying at the University of Pretoria. The following year, I was on a

hunt for new avenues in life. Although I still thought a lot about the possibility of reviving my passion for tennis, I redirected my interests towards my studies.

I continued to struggle with constant emotional battles related to where I could have been, where I should be, and where I was. I felt lost and in desperate need of some direction in my life. I struggled with bulimia, and the issue of food was haunting me wherever I went.

### **Breaking Free**

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. (Galatians 5:1)

There were times I would promise God that I would never allow bulimia to take hold of me again, but I failed to keep my promise. Sometimes I would even bargain with Him, but it only made things worse, as I could never keep my end of the bargain. It came to the point where I could no longer deny that I had a problem. I was struggling with bulimia and needed help—the kind of help I could not give myself. But the emptiness I felt was not the kind that could be filled by anything the world had to offer.

I had to hit rock bottom before I turned to God again. I had a God-shaped hole somewhere inside that needed the presence of God! I finally asked Him to free me from the bondage of food and a low self-esteem. I also asked Him to come and fill me with His picture of me and help me to believe in myself again. It took a couple of months, and I had many failed attempts, but once I gave all my thoughts and efforts over to God, He set me free.

It was not something that I could do on my own, and it did not happen overnight. Yet over time, I noticed my thoughts were not wrapped around food anymore, and eventually my destructive habit was gone. The relief that followed felt wonderful. God gave me a new purpose in life and changed me from within.

God does not want anyone to be held hostage by anything and will be there for us once we are ready to admit that we have a problem and need help. The kind of help that God gives us is unique. Even when the world judges us for the things we have done and regards us as unworthy of help, God knows we are not perfect and wants to set us free from whatever is keeping us in bondage. Whether it is an addiction, a habit, a thought, or anything else, He wants us to realize that we are free in Him through Jesus.<sup>[16]</sup>

I was reminded of God's love for me and the extents to which He would go for me, no matter how far I wandered from Him. Every time I considered food, I thought about God and meditated on Deuteronomy 8:3: "... man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD." Because I was under God's protection, something that could have destroyed me failed. God turned my situation around and brought me into a closer relationship with Him. All praise to God for that!

### **Harvest Time**

Crossroads are a part of every person's journey in life, and the way one deals with each crossroad determines the course his or her life takes. Sometimes we make mistakes, but as long as we are in this life, there is room for correction.

Life is also filled with seasons, during which certain trees bear their fruits. A tree

requires a specific season to bear its fruit, but weeds can grow all year. I had times when I bore fruit, but that never prevented me from making mistakes (weeds). Still, I knew God had all the answers, and He knew which way my life would go.

God was there for every decision, big or small, even though I did not always ask for His guidance. My decisions were often based on my own feelings and emotions, and I sometimes allowed negative emotions and fears to take root in my life. That brought forth unwanted fruits of depression, insecurity, and disobedience.

I heard pastors say that the peace of God should be my regulator when I make a decision. They said that when I entered a situation and felt uneasy, I should take a step back to where I had peace and then make sure I keep my peace. There were times when I was not always sure if I felt the right peace, but I did what I thought was right and trusted God to provide the required outcomes.

I can see clearly now how God was giving me all the signs indicating that my time in the world of tennis was over. I could have spared myself so much pain if I had been more open to His truth and less focused on my own will. I underestimated the patience and mercy of God and only later realized that He tried for about five years to show me what else He had in store for me. But I kept on attempting to do things my way.

My parents had their own challenges to deal with. They could not allow themselves to step in and help me out; they had to sit on the sidelines and watch me fight my own battles. Yet they were always there to pick me up when I was down and gave me the love and support I needed. I will always be grateful for what my family has done for me, for all the sacrifices they made for me, expecting nothing in return.

God never turned His back on me either. He just patiently looked at my life and waited for me to return to Him and follow His will. He was still there when I eventually asked for His help and comfort. He knew that my eyes would be opened eventually, but until that happened, He continued to be my loving Father, who knows me best. He knew that a decision being forced upon me would not open my eyes. Instead, He allowed me to experience the consequences of my own decisions, and finally, I realized my mistakes and what was meant for me.

I never again wanted to get so caught up in the things of this world that I missed the most important blessings in my life—the love I received from my family and friends and the time I had with them, which I might not have the next day, and the ability to get up every morning and do what I loved. Putting my will above God's robbed me of my blessings.

God's will became my heart's desire. Living the life that God had in store for me required sacrifices, but pursuing God's will became my priority.

## **Finding My Way**

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)

I fought a constant battle, wondering whether or not I was in the right place. I felt that there was more to life than achievements. I had already experienced the things the world could offer, but none of that gave me true joy or peace. God used my

circumstances to draw me closer to Him. I wanted to be in a place where God's blessings could flow freely into my life.

Once I spent more time with Jesus by studying His Word and just enjoying His presence, I found peace, purpose, and prosperity in all the areas of my life. I did not always understand the ways of the Lord, as they are so much higher than mine,<sup>[17]</sup> but I knew my own plans brought me no joy. God's plan, even though I did not know the full extent of them, brought forth light that no darkness could consume.

I was always prepared to give up everything for tennis, but I was not prepared to give up tennis for God. However, when I lost the one thing that I thought was my life, I gained my life through the only One who is Life.

I realized that tennis was meant to be a part of my life but not the main focus. I had to become still and know that God is my God. He is the Shepherd, and I am the sheep. It was not easy to realize that I was wrong and God always had a much bigger and better plan for my life.<sup>[18]</sup> But true to His character, He soon started turning my life around. My identity was no longer determined by tennis but by who I am in Christ.

Sometimes I would dwell in the past, and during those times, I did not allow God to lead me into new seasons He had planned for me. I had to consciously remind myself not to go back and get onto the emotional rollercoaster of my past. I had to break free from it and spend some time with God—praying, talking, thinking, reading, or just waiting on Him—so that I could become sensitive to the words He spoke to me.

A verse that came to me shortly after I started my new journey with God was Deuteronomy 9:3: "Therefore understand today that the LORD your God *is* He who goes over before you *as* a consuming fire. He will destroy them and bring them down before you; so you shall drive them out and destroy them quickly, as the LORD has said to you."

The fears I had of the unknown that was lying ahead of me did not matter anymore. I knew God was going out before me like a consuming fire so that I could walk through in victory. It almost felt like I was merely a spectator of the path laid out for me. I knew whatever I was going to go through, God would clear the path for me and support me.

I experienced a number of little things reminding me of God's love on a daily basis. Sometimes they came through people who were a true blessing to me that He sent across my path. Through them and other situations, He gave me acceptance and love, almost as if He physically embraced me.

There were also many spiritual battles taking place as the enemy lost his grip on me and the love of God set me free. Many doors opened and closed in my life, some that I had been waiting on for a very long time. It showed me that God was watching over me and was not going to let me go. Those were precious moments to me.

It always amazed me how God sent people across my path who went through a lot of pain in their own lives. He would use me as a listening ear or the shoulder they needed to cry on. He brought relief and healing to their wounds through the words He spoke through my mouth. It was a blessing to me as much as it was a blessing to them. I knew that as they experienced healing, God, in a beautiful way, was healing me too.

Every situation I faced portrayed God's awesomeness. I knew that I never had the answers to any problem put in front of me, but the compassion that God gave me for people left me speechless. Every time He gave them the answers they needed through me. And I knew I could not claim the glory because I was only the instrument in His hands.

I realized that when I get down and need something or someone to pick me up, that

something or someone is God. He knows exactly what I need—what will make me smile; take my breath away; and leave me speechless, yet so fulfilled that nothing else can compare to it. Nothing made me feel more fulfilled than when I was experiencing God. He was the answer to all my questions.

There was one incident that I will always remember. I was having coffee with a friend who was ten years older than I was. She was married with two children. I, on the other hand, had not even had a serious romantic relationship in my life. She often shared her difficult times with me, but this one time she was sharing her marital problems with me and was planning to get a divorce, but she was not entirely sure what to do. I wanted to give her advice, but since I had no experience in that area I had nothing to say.

After a little while of listening to her, I felt the Holy Spirit prompting me to say to her, "God does not want you to get a divorce. What your husband is doing to you is not right, but God is going to restore your marriage to a better place than what it was ever before. Just go home, and trust Him over the weekend."

She looked at me, and I think we were both quite surprised at the authoritative way I spoke to her. She confirmed that she did not think those words came from me but that God spoke them through me. And within the next few days, many things happened in her marriage, but divorce was not one of them. God brought restoration and got all the glory.

My quest for God's will continued, and it required exercising the discernment God gave me, a gift available to every believer.<sup>[19]</sup> It was a continuing process, one I still go through every day of my life. I did not always know if I was following the right guidance, but I just kept doing what I believed was right and trusted God to help me. I always planned in advance, but God knew what was best for me. He only gave me enough to take me through my next step. By doing that, God taught me to continue trusting in Him instead of relying on my own plans. I treasured the relationship I had with Him. The more time I spent with God and in His Word, the clearer His voice became to me.

Sometimes I did not like what God was saying to me, and I would try to find another answer. For instance, there was no quick fix for my impatience. I had to learn patience by going through situations that provided opportunities to be patient. I often missed the mark by being impatient, but that definitely did not mean that all hope was lost. God's grace and hope for my life are so much greater than any sins I commit.<sup>[20]</sup> God never gave up on what He had planned for me. Through the years, He stood with His arms wide open, ready to welcome me back whenever I focused on the wrong goals.

God desired more than anything to have a relationship with me. As with any healthy relationship, He wanted to spend time with me so that I could get to know Him personally. He wanted what was best for me, even though I could not always see it. He knew I needed Him and His will in my life.

Praying daily helped me grow into a deeper relationship with God. I wanted Him to literally show me His will and what He wanted for me. I was ready to appreciate the blessings of His perfect will for my life. I did not always know if I was praying and asking for the right things, but I tried to learn from the Bible what God's will is for me and prayed as much as possible in line with that. After I prayed, I would trust God to lead me in the right direction. It was, and still is, a challenge to discern whether I heard what God wanted or what I wanted. But I know if I follow the peace within me and trust His Holy Spirit to guide me, I will find His way.

## **My Mistakes Do Not Keep Me from God's Goodness**

I often thought that because of my mistakes and shortcomings I was unable to experience God's goodness and enjoy all His blessings. I believed my mistakes disqualified me from God's goodness. This was a complete distortion of the truth in God's Word. God shows that even when we make mistakes that disqualify us in the eyes of the world, He can still come and bless us and turn a bad situation in our favor.

In Genesis 20, Abraham told king Abimelek of Gerar that his wife Sarah was his sister, and the king took Sarah for himself. When God appeared to the king in a dream and told him the truth about who Sarah was, Abimelek pleaded his innocence before God, saying he did not know the truth because of Abraham's lie. God knew that and therefore kept Abimelek from sinning by touching Sarah. Abimelek returned Sarah to Abraham, blessed him with sheep and cattle, and gave Abraham a choice to live wherever he wanted.

God knew about Abraham's lies, but He did not hold them against him. Instead, He showed Abraham His mercy by turning the situation in his favor. God has that same heart of mercy for me, even when I make mistakes

## **New Breath of Life**

In 2006, when I was twenty-two, God started dealing with me about the principle of obedience. My obedience to God should never have been because I felt obligated and feared chastening but because I loved Him and wanted to obey His Word. Out of love, obedience flows.

In the midst of that, God laid it on my heart to consider being baptized in water. I was confused, as I was "baptized" as a baby by my parents, when they dedicated my life to God. It did not feel right to do it again, on my terms.

Every time I opened my Bible, it would happen to fall on something about the baptism of Jesus. I decided to study every Scripture passage I could find to make sure that when I got baptized the way Jesus was, it would be for the right reasons.

Some of the reasons I found for water baptism (i.e. my whole body being dipped underneath the water) were these: First, Jesus set the example for me to be baptized by water, just as He was during His time on earth.<sup>[21]</sup> Second, the water baptism represents the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It typifies my death to my old life, with all my faults and dirt being washed off and buried, and my being resurrected into a new life in Jesus. The water baptism signifies the old man being buried and the new man being born into a new life in Jesus Christ.<sup>[22]</sup>

My need to be baptized in water like Jesus grew stronger. It was a choice that nobody else could make for me. Soon thereafter, the opportunity presented itself, and I grabbed it with both hands. As an act of obedience, because of what was laid on my heart, I got baptized, and new doors were opened in my walk with God. There still were times when life became more challenging, but the peace and wisdom of the Holy Spirit never failed me.

## Chapter 6

### **A Second Chance in God's Fountain of Grace**

#### **Comrades 2009**

After I gave up my dreams for tennis, I redirected my sports interests to road running. My elder brother always took part in races, and at first, my intent was not to run farther than ten kilometers. However, after running a couple of races, I soon became interested in running longer distances. Due to my tennis training, I was generally fit, and the adjustment to running was easy. I quickly excelled above expectations.

In February of 2009, I started to set my mind on doing the Comrades. I prayed about it and had peace about competing. Shortly after entering into the 2009 Comrades, which was a "down run" starting in Pietermaritzburg and finishing after eighty-nine odd kilometers in Durban, I had a dream in which God was telling me that He knew the desires of my heart and would protect me for one Comrades. It would be my run of faith, but thereafter, I should not do it again. I woke up the next morning quite amazed by the dream. It felt so real, as if God were sitting next to me and talking to me.

The very next day, I received a phone call from one of my mother's friends. She told me that she had a message for me that God laid upon her heart. At the time, I had not yet shared my dream with anyone and kept it to myself. When she shared her message with me, it was the very same one I had in my dream.

I was very excited about my Comrades. However, one month before the race, while I was running one afternoon, I felt a sharp pain in my right knee. I never had a knee injury before and had no idea what could be wrong. After many visits to the physiotherapist and doctor, it was confirmed that I had iliotibial band syndrome (ITB) in my right knee. It got worse and was hindering me in my running, but I held on to the promise that God was going to protect me through one Comrades.

I could not run for the rest of the time prior to the Comrades, but I was adamant that God would completely heal my knee before the start of the race. I believed that I would have no problem on the day of the Comrades. It was my race of faith, and believed that I'd be able to do it. Unfortunately, or should I say fortunately, my idea of my race of faith and God's idea of it were completely different.

I prayed and wondered what I would say to myself when I reached a point where I felt that I could not go on any longer. I did not have to wait very long before God sent me the answer. I visited my mother's friend, who prayed with me and anointed me before the race. The next moment, she looked at me and said, "Maretha, God is saying to you that when you reach a point in the race where you feel that you cannot go on any longer, just remember this: The same Holy Spirit that was in Jesus the day when He carried the cross on Calvary with His broken body, that same Holy Spirit is in you. He will carry you through."<sup>[23]</sup> After receiving this revelation, I thought to myself that when I have that same Holy Spirit in me, which I knew I had, I can do anything together with Him and should not fear any challenge.

On Sunday, 31 May 2009, at the age of twenty-five, I started my race feeling great, without any pain in my knee. At the five kilometer mark, a familiar pain shot through my right knee, and shortly thereafter, the stiffness in my knee increased. I knew my race of

faith had begun. I prayed and asked God to please run through me, as I knew there was no way I would be able to finish the race on my own. The injury was advanced.

I kept reminding myself of God's promise that He would protect me for one Comrades, and within a few moments, I felt my body relax. I could literally feel how God's Holy Spirit gave me strength to go on. I experienced an unbelievable peace flowing in and over me, and I knew that God was helping me.

Throughout the race, I continued to hold on to God's promise and was determined to never even think of quitting. There were times when I was seriously considering it, but I could never make that decision because I remembered that the same Holy Spirit that was in Jesus when He carried His cross was in me. I pictured Jesus on the cross and found new strength each time that I thought about it.

You get twelve hours to complete the race but I finished my race in ten hours and nineteen minutes, as can be seen below from my splits taken from the official Comrades website at the time.

| Split                      | Race Time | Time of Day | Split Time | Overall Pos | Category Pos | Gender Pos | Dist. Done | Dist. To Go | Speed |
|----------------------------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------|
| Camperdown (62kms to go)   | 02:26:36  | 07:56:50    |            | 2936        | 12           | 81         | 26.77      | 62.4        | 5.48  |
| Drummond (halfway)         | 04:25:07  | 09:55:21    |            | 3633        | 27           | 213        | 44.97      | 44.2        | 5.90  |
| Winston Park (31kms to go) | 06:03:17  | 11:33:31    |            | 3965        | 32           | 293        | 58.27      | 30.9        | 6.23  |
| Cowies Hill (18kms to go)  | 07:38:10  | 13:08:24    |            | 4199        | 41           | 373        | 70.97      | 18.2        | 6.46  |
| Mayville (7kms to go)      | 09:12:58  | 14:43:12    |            | 4496        | 49           | 458        | 82.17      | 7           | 6.73  |
| Finish                     | 10:19:12  | 15:49:26    |            | 4935        | 67           | 572        | 89.17      | 0           | 6.94  |

The victory of faith that day was amazing. My body was extremely sore afterwards, as can be expected. A little while after the race, when we arrived at our friends' house (where we stayed), I collapsed in my dad's arms as he helped me into the house. I was out for a couple of seconds before I regained consciousness. The obvious conclusion was that I was just exhausted, but little did we know that there was a much deeper reason behind it.

## Comrades 2010

After a good rest of three months following my first Comrades, I started running again. Most people told me that I would not be able to run long distances again after the seriousness of my knee injury during my first Comrades, but I refused to accept that. God completely healed me from that injury.

After a slow start, I decided to run a couple of races, including a marathon (just over forty-two kilometers). Since I felt no traces of my previous injury, I also considered a second Comrades. My race results were above all expectations, and I became a contender for top positions. Thus, I began to consider a future in running. In the back of my mind, I remembered my dream about running only one Comrades, but I did not see the harm in doing another one. I did not realize I was opening a door in my life that would cause me more pain.

In May of 2010, six days before the Comrades, a prayer was done for me, and I was anointed with oil. While I prayed by myself that morning before I went to the meeting, I thought to that if I was told not to go, I would accept it and not go to the Comrades. I did

not want to act outside the will of God, but if I was not stopped, I would go in confidence and run the Comrades. I had the faintest feeling inside that I should not be doing it, but my flesh and desire to achieve things in my life were still too strong. After the Comrades, my mother's friend told me that God had in fact told her that morning to tell me not to go but she did not think I would listen as she knew how strong my will was. I could not blame her for thinking that.

Just after I was anointed, I was asked, "Maretha, will you pull out during the race to save a soul for God, if He brings it across your path, even if you see the finish line in front of you?"

I answered, "Of course. You know me; I will." Little did I know what I said "yes" to on that Tuesday morning.

Sunday, 30 May 2010 arrived; it was the day of the Comrades. I had the most amazing run. My parents were with me, and I ran very well. At the halfway mark, I realized that if I continued that way, I would finish among the top ten South African women (which had been one of my goals, apart from achieving a silver medal [i.e., sub seven hours and thirty minutes]).

While I was out on the road, I was praying the blood of Jesus over myself, and with His anointing, I was running injury-free and very well. At 12:00 noon, my mom confirmed to everyone watching out for me that I would finish at around 12:52 P.M.; I would definitely make silver and be one of the top ten South African women.

The last time I saw my parents was at the five-kilometers-to-go mark, and I was still running at a good pace, feeling strong and more than ready to finish that amazing race. I never felt bad, I never walked or showed any signs of dehydration, and my time was so good that I was on track with extra minutes to get my silver medal.

When I was only three kilometers from the finish line, my parents rushed to find parking so they could watch me enter the stadium. And at 12:44 P.M., I was less than two kilometers from the finish line, my silver medal, and the opportunity to be one of the top ten South African women.

Everyone was fixated on the television, and my parents waited in great anticipation at the finish line, but there was no sign of me. One o'clock came, and I still did not come in. My parents started looking for me, and after two stressful hours, they found me at 15:30 P.M. that afternoon in the St. Augustine Hospital in Durban.

What happened? No one knew at that point. It seemed as if I just lost consciousness less than two kilometers before the end.

| Split                      | Race Time | Time of Day | Split Time | Overall Pos | Category Pos | Gender Pos | Dist. Done | Dist. To Go | Speed |
|----------------------------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------|
| Camperdown (62kms to go)   | 02:08:27  | 07:38:30    |            |             |              |            | 26.77      | 62.4        | 4.80  |
| Drummond (halfway)         | 03:38:22  | 09:08:25    |            |             |              |            | 44.97      | 44.2        | 4.86  |
| Winston Park (31kms to go) | 04:48:14  | 10:18:17    |            |             |              |            | 58.27      | 30.9        | 4.95  |
| Cowies Hill (18kms to go)  | 05:50:38  | 11:20:41    |            |             |              |            | 70.97      | 18.2        | 4.94  |
| Mayville (7kms to go)      | 06:49:06  | 12:19:09    |            |             |              |            | 82.17      | 7           | 4.98  |
| Finish                     |           |             |            |             |              |            | 89.17      | 0           |       |

The above splits were taken from the official Comrades website at the time. The last time check I went through was at the seven-kilometer-to-go mark, but I never crossed the finish line.

For me, the following two hours were a nightmare. It felt as though I arrived at the gates of hell. Between being awake and unconscious, I wrestled with the devil, who kept saying to me, "You were disobedient to God, and I, the devil, have the right to your soul. You are mine now, and I have come to take you." For those two hours, I pleaded with God for forgiveness and a second chance.

God's request for me to pull out of the Comrades for Him, even if I saw the finish line, and my confirmation that I was prepared to do it came true. Following is my story of my experience at the Comrades.

At three kilometers to go before the finish line, I started to feel incredibly bad. I knew something was seriously wrong, and immediately checked my heart rate, but everything appeared to be okay. The next moment, everything became very blurry. I started moving into a black tunnel, and it felt like I could not escape. It felt like I was starting to lose control over my own body.

I thought at that moment that I just needed to go a little slower and I would feel better. After such a wonderful race, it was about time that I felt a little fatigue, and I figured that if I just went a little slower, I would feel better. But I didn't. I knew something different was happening.

I continued going into a black tunnel in my mind, and I saw the two-kilometer mark and passed it. I prayed and asked the Lord to help me. I said, "I have a big problem and don't know what to do, but only if it is Your will..." And the next moment, I was waking up in the ambulance.

If I was waking up in my flesh, my first question would have been, "Did I get my silver medal?" But I did not open my eyes in the physical realm.

I could not believe where I was, but I immediately realized that there was a huge spiritual battle happening. My first words were, "I know that I made a very big mistake. I went and ran the Comrades for a second time against Your will. I should never have done that. I am so sorry, Father. Please forgive me!"

The next moment, the devil (the accuser) was standing over me, saying, "You were disobedient to God, your soul is mine now, and I came to take it."

I began to feel extremely claustrophobic and realized that I needed to ask the Lord for help. I did not want to at first, because the devil convinced me that it was too late and I was not worthy of the Lord's help anymore. Lying in that ambulance, I could feel drops of water streaming down my body as I dehydrated at the same time that the spiritual battle was taking place.

The next moment, I felt the life being pulled out of me, and it felt as if I completely gave myself over to a darkness I cannot describe. I immediately lost liters of water and completely dehydrated.

Initially, I didn't ask the Lord for help, and everything became pitch black, dark, and very mixed up. Then a prompting stirred inside me to call out the name of "Jesus," but I could not bring myself to cry out to God or to say the name "Jesus."

After a terrible struggle within myself, I just began to call out the name of the Lord, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." The air around me got lighter, and the darkness started to fade away. I was convinced that I was standing before the gates of heaven and hell and that a decision needed to be made, there and then, about where I was going: Heaven or hell? Life or death?

I again apologized for running the second Comrades. I realized that because of my disobedience, I only had myself to blame.

The devil looked down at me, again started laughing, and said, "Is this your second Comrades? What did you think was going to happen?"

The next moment, we stopped at the hospital, and there was incredibly loud knocking against the ambulance. It sounded and felt like there was a claim against my life, and they (the devil and his followers) were taking me; the doors would have to be opened. My life was now theirs.

As I was taken out of the ambulance, it was as if I could see through the gates of heaven, the brightness, the green pastures. I could almost feel the atmosphere of peace, joy, and perfection, but I could not reach out to it.

As I was wheeled through the hospital, I could see the passageways of heaven, and I wanted to go in, but I wasn't allowed to; they just pushed me passed. I saw waiting rooms outside the passageways, and there were people sitting there. Some I recognized, and others I didn't. I only later realized why.

I then saw people in my life who had terrible disappointment on their faces as they looked at me. At that point, I was convinced that I was on my way to hell. It further felt like the devil wanted to show me all the things that I could have had if I went to heaven, but now I would only experience regret. I wondered, *Where is the Lord in all of this?*

Yet, I could feel that the Lord was there with me. He gave me a knowing on the inside that He would never leave me. I had to believe that. The devil was claiming to have legal grounds, because of my disobedience, to come and take a premature death, even though he had no authority to do so.<sup>[24]</sup> God used it as my test of faith (before He interceded).

I was pushed into the hospital room, and there were doctors and nurses around me. I felt that I was already dead and there was simply a fight to see where I would go. If it were up to the devil, he would make things as unbearable for me as possible.

Next, it was as if a movie of my life played in front of me. The devil played every wrong decision I made, every mistake I ever made, and every person I hurt in order to make a mockery of my Christianity. Then I again cried out the Lord in my anxiety, and things became clearer.

The next moment, the doctor stood over me and said, "You will be okay."

At first, I did not want to believe it, and things again became a blur. I could not talk, or at least it felt like I could not talk. Then a nurse came to me and said, "You will be okay." This time, I had to make a decision to believe it.

The Lord then showed me what the people in my life would go through if I were to leave them behind—the pain and regrets. He showed me that the devil would go out of his way to make a joke of me with everyone. He would sow a lie that I went to hell. Some people, whose souls would have been in jeopardy, were pointed out to me, people who were very dear to me. I could not accept that other souls would be jeopardized as a result of my disobedience. I pleaded to the Lord that if I was going to die a premature death, He would please go and protect each of my loved ones from the lies the devil would tell them. I also told God that I was prepared to die if it meant my loved ones would be saved.

Furthermore, I experienced the feelings and emotions that other people would experience if they were going to hell. My whole body felt like it had been set alight. It

felt as though my whole body was melting and drops of flesh were falling off my body. I had epileptic attacks (which I never had before in my life). I experienced incredible feelings of regret, anxiety, and panic that I cannot describe.

I also saw how people are going to realize that they knew the truth and were warned a number of times to open their eyes, but they did not want to and have to pay the price. They always postponed their decision to follow Jesus until later. The regret is tremendous, and they just want to go back and quickly open the door and change that one decision, but they realize they cannot go back and do things another way. It is too late for eternity, and they are going to burn forever in the merciless fire.

The Lord told me that as great as His mercy is on earth, His judgment towards the ones who reject Him is much worse at the end of times, when He will come again to take His children home for eternity. He will do anything to have all His children saved, but it remains every person's own choice. People should not blind themselves to the truth, because the price they will pay is great.

The whole time these scenes were playing in front of me, I was being given choices, and I could see every time what I would have answered in my flesh. But the Lord gave me incredible clarity about what *His* answer would be. I had to decide which one to choose. How wonderful the Lord's mercy is; the choice is mine to choose His will.

The truth was that the Holy Spirit already sealed my soul, and my place in heaven was already booked. The devil did not have a right to my soul; yet he attempted to have a right to it because I had been disobedient. As I stood before the Lord and pleaded for a second chance, I realized that I would not be able to come back on my own conditions but on the Lord's conditions. My purpose on earth would no longer be about my goals and my will. It could only be about the Lord's will from then on.

The Lord asked me a final question: *"Maretha, do you think you have already fulfilled My will for your life?"*

I so badly wanted to say "yes," like I had done what was expected of me, but I knew deep inside of me that I had not yet fulfilled the Lord's will for my life. So I replied, "No, Lord, I have not."

I realized that none of my goals in life or hours of working overtime meant anything for God's kingdom.

The Lord made it clear to me that He was going to give me a second chance, but my own will was forsaken from then on. The only will that could determine my life was God's will and His will alone.

After two hours of hell, I regained consciousness. I realized that I was, in fact, alive and had a second chance for a very specific goal that God would reveal to me.

As soon as I woke up from the spiritual warfare, it appeared as if there was nothing wrong with me—apart from the fact that just two hours earlier I had renal failure and internal bleeding, was on the verge of a coma, and had heart enzymes leaking over the 11,000 mark to the point of a heart attack and seizures. The doctors had their normal theories for Comrades runners ending up in hospital, but there was no explanation for what happened to me. Although, it was confirmed that if I had reached the finish line, I definitely would have been dead.

Despite the seriousness of my condition on Sunday, all my vital signs were normal on Monday. There still was no medical explanation for the situation. I should have been

in intensive care for days, but there was no sign of the trauma that my body had gone through the day before.

Initially, the heartache and disappointment of missing the silver medal was huge, but I realized that there must have been a much greater goal behind everything. I was not sure if I only had a dream. I had always heard about those kinds of experiences, but I never thought I would go through one myself. I had many questions to ask the Lord, and I wanted answers, because I could not have been better prepared for the race physically.

When my parents arrived at the hospital, I started telling them everything, from beginning to end, sharing every little detail with them. After I finished, we knew there was much more to my experience than just a dream.

I found out later that the Lord called three different people to intercede for my life on Sunday during the Comrades. I did not initially realize how bad my situation was and how close I came to a premature death. However, one thing I did realize within the first few hours of my experience was that the work God was doing was more than I was aware of. The impact my story had, even without all the answers, on all the people around me in the hospital was proof that God was already working in amazing ways.

When I returned to Pretoria, the Lord led me to the answers to my questions. I was taken back to the original agreement, in which the Lord told me that He would protect me for one Comrades. I had followed my own will and run the second one. I had moved outside of His will. Even though I was disobedient, the Father kept me under His anointing and protection because He loves me.

Furthermore, I had given away the right to get a medal in the second Comrades six days before it, when I agreed that I was prepared to pull out from the race to save a soul, if God wanted that. He allowed me to pull out, and at that stage, I did not think about my promise to Him. Yet, later I realized what I had said "yes" for; it was my testimony. His grace is greater than my disobedience. He came in the midst of my disobedience and embraced me with His grace to bring new purpose to my life.

All believers in Jesus Christ are citizens of heaven, with a work permit for earth. As such, God is not consumed with our earthly goals that will give us personal glory and riches. He pays attention to the desires of our hearts, as we are important to Him, but for God, it is always about our being obedient to Him through faith in Christ at all times so that He can be glorified.

The obedience God requires is not something we can do out of our own efforts; we need the Holy Spirit to help us. His goals for us are completely different than ours. For Him, it is about us following His will and being the fishers of men so that souls can be reaped for heaven for His glory, through the work of His grace in our lives.

Again, it is not about me and what I can do. It's about what He already did for me and what I allow Him to do through me. God equips us for everything that He requires us to do. And the most important thing we should do is daily walk in faith, with our eyes on Jesus.

In the book of Revelation, we read about the crowns that believers in Jesus will receive. God is not going to ask us how many medals we collected on earth. Our salvation and rewards are based solely on His grace and our acceptance of it. God does not want anyone to be lost; He wants us to be found in Him. And God will reward us with crowns.

There is a hell, and there will be a stage when you cannot turn back to correct the

things you have done wrong. There is a "point of no return" if you continue to reject Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

### **A Different Perspective**

My parents had their own experience and battle to fight during that day at the Comrades. The following is an account of the events written by my father.

As Maretha's father, I got used to things not going the ordinary way, but nothing could prepare me for the events that followed that day.

We got up in the morning filled with expectations for the day to come. I was excited and yet a little tense. I first went to Maretha's room to see if everything was okay, and I wanted to pray for her for strength and good luck for the race, but I never did. I do not know why I did not do it.

As we entered the City Hall, where the elite athletes warmed up, both of us felt a little out of place, as we were not used to such treatment. It was the first year that Maretha qualified as an elite athlete. She did not want to warm up like the others because she just said, "I am going to run for almost ninety kilometers, and that is far enough. I will get warm as we start running. I do not need any extra mileage on my legs."

I was proud of her when I saw her among those athletes, especially when she stood at the starting line among them. I realized that she really worked so hard to be there and she deserved it. The next few moments passed so quickly; it was in a blink of an eye, and it was all over.

After the start, I just wanted to see her at every possible point in the race and managed to do so. The first time was at Ashburton; then Lion's park; then five kilometers later, next to the highway at Camperdown; next at Alverston; then at Fields Hill and on the old road to Kloof; next over the bridge at Kloof and under the bridge at Westville and toll gates; then after that, we saw her once more, which was only minutes before Maretha collapsed.

When we saw her, she looked so well. I realized that she was definitely going to run her silver; everything was, until this point in time, perfectly in place.

I jumped into the car very excited and could not wait to get to the finish line in the stadium. I wanted to be there when Maretha entered to take as many pictures as possible. The car was barely parked, and I was out of the car, on my way to the stadium. I ran so that I could be in front of the finish line at 12:45, because I figured Maretha would be finishing any time from 12:45 on. I had a good idea which athletes were running with Maretha and could not wait to see her finish.

I very excitedly stood and waited for her, but when it became 12:55, I began to worry and wondered what was wrong, as she must have finished already. When the gun was fired at 13:00, I was very disappointed for her sake that she missed her silver medal, but I was convinced that something must have gone wrong. Maybe she got cramps and was walking to the end, and in that case, I told myself, she should be in at around 13:30. We knew Maretha would not give up; she will crawl to the end if that was what it took to finish.

When 13:30 came, she still had not come, and I really started getting worried. I started asking the officials to find out where she was, but nobody could help me, so I decided to wait until 13:45 before starting to look for her.

At 13:45, I moved to where my wife and our friends were, and we all were extremely concerned. I think I asked the Lord about what happened to her, but I cannot really remember, as at that time, there were thousands of thoughts going through my mind. Our friends were with us, and one lady saw a picture in her mind of Maretha falling. Little did we know the truth there was in that.

I went to the information tent but had no success. Then I tried the medical tent, but they did not want to allow us any access. I went back to the information tent; still no success. I went back to the medical tent, where I asked my wife to ask the Nedbank team manager to come and help us get into the tent. Then we walked through the three medical tents with an official but could not find her. That was when the official asked me if I tried the ambulance tent.

It was 14:45 when we found out from the ambulance that she was taken to the St. Augustine hospital around one 13:00 by an ambulance. It was more than two hours since we had last seen her, and we were beyond worried. Fortunately, I was able to stay calm and think clearly throughout the whole ordeal.

The official indicated that Maretha collapsed and dehydrated and was also suffering internal bleeding. Concern did no longer explain how we felt. In the rush to go and look for her, we had many questions and wanted to know why this had to happen to her. I cannot recall ever asking the question to the Lord. We were just far too shocked about what happened.

We ran to our car at 15:00. Then it took us thirty minutes to get to the hospital that was only four kilometers away. On our way to the hospital, the nurse called us to say that Maretha was there with them.

While we were driving to the hospital, I was thinking to myself how disappointed Maretha must have been for not finishing, especially at such a critical point of the race. I then decided that it was not important that she did not finish and that I was not going to ask any questions. Instead, I would just comfort and support her and tell her how proud I was of her for coming so far—running eighty-seven kilometers in about seven hours ten minutes is quite something.

The first look in Maretha's eyes when we arrived at the hospital was of complete bewilderment. The details she told us were overwhelming, and I realized that she must have gone through a horrible time. The reference to one foot in hell because of her disobedience was huge for me. At that point in time, I did not know that she was not allowed to run the race. I was just grateful that she was still alive.

I was extremely worried about Maretha's health, but still it was very interesting that she recovered so quickly after everything happened. For example, when we arrived at the hospital, she was on her way to take a shower and walked around as if nothing had happened. I wondered if she could have actually managed to finish the race, until I heard that she was unconscious for almost two hours.

After the tests were done that night, we went home, but we had a really hard time.

Many questions were asked, and many emotions were running through us. We did not sleep very well. I often wondered if those things happened to her because of something I did wrong.

The next morning was quite a revelation when we went to pick her up from the hospital. She seemed unscarred and untouched. I could not understand that she could move so easily and comfortable after everything that happened.

I realized that God really looked after her and protected her through the race. The fact that she fell and there was not a mark or scar on her body, her glasses did not even have a mark on them, was a definite sign that she was protected and there was a much bigger and mightier Hand over her. We were just grateful that she was still with us, and we were so proud of the woman she's become. We knew she has a very important role to fulfill, and she was doing it."

### **New Revelations**

The day of the Comrades brought about its own testimony, but there were a few other happenings that also played an important role.

About two weeks before the event, I dreamt I was running the Comrades. There were specific parts of the race where I could actually see myself on the road, running a great Comrades. The interesting part was that I was running with a girl from the start, for the entire race. Along the way, we would stop every now and then to help people. Our finishing time was seven hours twenty-two minutes, which could have been my actual finishing time had I crossed the finish line. When I woke up the next morning, I thought it was God confirming that I was good enough and would be able to run my silver medal race in less than seven hours and thirty minutes, which I had my doubts about at that point.

The one aspect of the dream that confused me a little was how it would have been possible to run such a time while still stopping to help people. There is little time to stop on the road if you want to run for a silver medal.

The answers to my questions only became clear to me the Sunday night when I was staying over in the hospital. I realized there were two sets of wills represented in the dream, my own and God's. Mine was that I would be running the Comrades in seven hours and twenty-two minutes. (On the day of the Comrades, I realized from the halfway mark that my splits were in line to run such a time, and for the first time ever, I really was running with another lady athlete the whole way, from the start.) If I followed my will, I would have run a seven hour and twenty-two minute Comrades, but that also would have been my time of death. The real purpose of the dream was to tell me that God's will was that I would stop in order to start helping people in my life—people God ordained for my life.

From the moment we drove away from the Comrades, God took me on an exciting journey to experience His love and truth for my life. Every single step that I took from that moment on had a new meaning for my life. I was dealing with God on many of the questions I had after what happened. But the hurt, sadness, and disappointment I felt after the Comrades lasted only for a moment. As soon as I realized on the Tuesday morning after the Comrades that there was a much bigger purpose in all of it and that the silver medal was not going to add much more meaning to my life, I found peace and knew that

God was busy doing something great.

On the Thursday morning after the Comrades, while I was still lying in bed and reflecting back on the last few days' events, I heard a soft Voice inside me saying, "*Maretha, get up and run; you have a story to tell.*" At first, I thought that was just absolutely ridiculous. I was not going to go out and run so soon after the Comrades, but again the Voice came: "*Maretha, get up and run; you have a story to tell. I am with you!*" At that moment, I knew it was God speaking to me and that He had a plan.

I got up and went for a ten kilometer run. It was like none of what I went through physically the last few days had happened. I was running without any pain or signs of the physical battle my body survived. I came back home afterwards and realized that I had no excuses not to run, but when I do, it will be when God tells me to.

In September of 2010, I went to the cardiologist for a check-up because my mother was still concerned about what happened at the Comrades and insisted that I go, just to make sure everything was in order. I thought the check-up would only last a few minutes. But after spending four hours in consulting rooms, I was booked for a heart procedure within the next week.

According to the doctor's diagnosis, I was born with a heart condition. And after looking at the results of the tests taken at the Comrades, the doctor's view was that I had the profile of a heart attack, which was something that did not even cross my mind at any point in time during all the ordeals I went through.

A lot of things took place in the days that followed, and after a three-and-a-half-hour procedure, the doctor advised us that there was nothing they could do to heal my condition. I would just have to manage it.

I was not shocked. Instead, I felt an unbelievable peace fill me in every part of my being. I knew who I was, and what was going to become of me was completely in God's hand. The healing of my heart was not in the hands of men but in God's hands.<sup>[25]</sup>

## **The Love of God**

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

Every person has his or her definition of God's love, but when I think of God's love, I see it like this:

### **God's Love**

God embraces me with His love—  
the ultimate love of sacrificing His only beloved Son for me.  
He loves me and never leaves me,  
even in the midst of my sin or my darkest hour.  
His grace surrounds me as with a shield.

I can live and love because He first loved me.

Many people thought that God judged or punished me through what happened at the Comrades, but He did not. There was never even a moment that I felt God was reprimanding me for doing something wrong. The fact was that I was disobedient, and

the devil wanted me to believe that I was being punished by God.

When I realized that God never reminded me of what I did wrong but comforted me the whole time and was there with me, I knew God loved me and was not angry with me. God already punished Jesus for all the wrongs I did and will do. He will not punish me again for that which Jesus was already punished. Otherwise, Jesus died in vain, and I knew that was not the truth.

God knew about my heart condition all along. He also knew the plans the devil had should I continue to push myself so hard that my heart could not take it. God is a Father filled with love for His children; He cares about our hearts' desires, and He often gives them to us, even if they mean nothing for His kingdom. He knew my heart's desire to finish the Comrades, and He told me that He would protect me for one Comrades but that I should not run another one after that. I did not understand why at the time, but now I know I was not being punished but saved.

The limit God set for me regarding the Comrades was not to harm me but for my own good.<sup>[26]</sup> He knew that if I continued on the path I was on with my training, I was, in my ignorance, going to do damage to my heart and act outside His will. He knew about my defects, even if I did not know about them, and He wanted to protect me out of love, until the truth of His healing could manifest itself in my life.

He protected me through my first Comrades and brought me, against all odds, through it without it causing any permanent damage to my body. But by continuing to train and running the second Comrades, I was causing unnecessary damage to my body, which God never intended for me. I was truly astonished when I realized the love of God for me. He was not trying to take my joy away; He wanted to help me keep it and teach me His will.

## Chapter 7

### **The Fruits of My Journey**

I have been bent during the storms of life, but by the grace of God, I am still standing. Every challenge blown across my path served its own purpose, and God made it all turn out for my good. On the next few pages, I will share some of the lessons I learned and revelations I gained throughout my life thus far.

#### **Who is Responsible for the Disabilities I was Born With?**

Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "Neither this man, nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him." (John 9:1-3)

The one question that I wanted an answer to was: Who is behind my disability? But the answer did not come overnight. I was always taught that I was born with two fingers because Jesus made me that way. At the time, it made sense and helped me not to ask further questions. For my parents and me, it was a way of trying to deal with it and understand the challenges we were facing.

The earth was given over to the devil after the fall of man. Mankind allowed sickness, disease, and disabilities to enter this earth the day when sin was first committed in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, it should be understood that disease and disabilities never came from God but from the decisions made by mankind and the consequences of those decisions.<sup>[27]</sup>

I received a disability, but it did not escape the eyes of God. God could still use it to glorify His Name. And He had a bigger purpose of blessing me with divine healing and ultimately divine health. That was God's heart for me and makes my life worthwhile. My disability will not destroy me because I found my victory in Christ Jesus.

God is my Creator, and He made me in His likeness,<sup>[28]</sup> an image of perfection through Jesus. Because I received Jesus as my Savior, I am now measured according to Jesus' obedience. He loves me in spite of and with my disability.

It is not always about the beginning but about the end. Maybe you had a bad beginning; you might not have supporting, loving, and understanding parents, or you might have experienced a childhood of abuse and no love. Irrespective of your bad beginning, this I know: what really matters is the way you finish. If you give everything to God, you will have a good ending. It might not always be the one you imagined, but it will be the perfect ending for you, and in it, Jesus Christ's Name will be glorified. Therefore, irrespective of the beginning, don't look back; look ahead, and make it your best ending!

#### **God's Place in My Life**

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Matthew 6:33)

I always believed that I was putting God first. I made Him part of everything, but that was not enough. God wanted to be my first priority. I had put my will to play tennis and run my second Comrades first and made God fit in there. I acted on what I thought God's will was, instead of becoming quiet and waiting on Him. It was time to become part of His plans for my life. I might have stepped out of line at times, but God remained faithful. He knew me better than I knew myself. He never left me alone and was always prepared to step in where I fell short.

I struggled to surrender my desires for God's plan, but He brought me to my knees and revealed His ways to me—ways that are the best. I am His child, and He wanted me to see Him as my loving Father. God did not want to compete with anything in my life. Thus, I had to lose my life in tennis in order to gain my life in Christ.<sup>[29]</sup> It felt unbearable at the time, but today I am grateful.

God knows which doors should be closed in my life to keep me inside His will. It was hard when God closed the door to tennis. I wanted to open it, but when I look back now, I see He was doing the one thing for me that I did not have the courage to do myself.<sup>[30]</sup>

The sufferings and sacrifices I have to make on earth to live a life for God might seem huge, but in comparison to the rewards that I will receive in return, the sufferings and sacrifices are nothing.<sup>[31]</sup> The rewards may not always pay off on earth, but they will ensure me an eternity no money can buy. Our time on earth is a drop in the sea compared to the time we will have in eternity.

I always thought trying to live a holy life meant reading my Bible; going to church; sacrificing a few things; and dedicating my sport, studies, work, and relationships to God. However, in the meantime, I followed my own path and went after the things I planned for myself. I would pray and ask God for His guidance, but I either did not wait for His answer or accept the one He gave. I have learned that walking in Jesus' footsteps on a daily basis means laying down my life at Jesus' feet and dedicating every part of it to Him.

## **My Life, My Race**

But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For each one shall bear his own load. (Galatians 6:4-5)<sup>[32]</sup>

I often felt insecure because I was comparing myself to others. I felt inferior because I did not do as well as others, or they had something that I did not have, or they achieved results that I worked very hard for, or I did not have that perfect body like someone else. It took me a while before I understood that I am in my own race. I was not made to compete with somebody else in his or her race.

I exhausted myself emotionally, mentally, and physically, trying to become someone God did not mean for me to be. There was no point in competing with somebody else, as I am the only one involved in my race. God never measures me based on what other people achieve; He only looks at His plans for my life and whether or not I achieved them.

The biggest favor I did myself was starting to spend my energy on my own race in order to fulfill my God-given destiny.

## **Forgiveness and Taking Responsibility**

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13 NIV)

For a long time, I carried unforgiveness in my heart towards a number of people in my life. Unknowingly, I brought myself into bondage. I knew that as a child of God, I should forgive others, just as I am walking in continuous forgiveness with God. Yet I was under the impression that because I was hurt and dealt "a bad hand," so to speak, I had a right to be angry. As long as I did not forgive those who wronged me, I was not able to move forward. By being unforgiving, I was deceiving myself. I was only blocking my own growth and blessings by keeping unforgiveness in my heart. What I did not realize was that I was only hurting myself.

I forgot that I did not have to listen to the advice that was given to me by others when it was not within God's will for me. I did not have to take everything so seriously. I still had a choice.

My unforgiving attitude made me wonder whether or not I truly received God's forgiveness. God has forgiven every sin I have ever done or will do, and that will not be reversed. When I did not forgive, it did not mean that I was no longer forgiven by God, because God did not need my forgiveness; I did.

Nobody is perfect. The same way people hurt me, I also hurt others. As humans we do that, whether we mean to or not. We all make mistakes and should treat others with the same mercy we want to be treated with.<sup>[33]</sup> It will make it much easier to work through our disappointments.

It really caught my attention when God reminded me that Christ's death on the cross was an act of selfless love and forgiveness. Jesus died on the cross for everyone—for me and for those who hurt me. I had to show that same kind of love and forgiveness in all my relationships. God wanted me to see them through His eyes of love.

I thought, *Where do I start? How do I do this?* Then I prayed to God. I needed His help to look at others through His eyes. I could not do it by myself. I did not want to either, but I knew that if I wanted any chance at moving forward, I had to do it. I knew God looked at the intentions of my heart, and I had a choice.

Eventually, I was no longer angry all the time. I was finally, through the grace of God, able to forgive them, like God has forgiven me.

## **Success**

After the Comrades in 2010, I realized the truth in Genesis 39:2, and my definition of success changed drastically. Genesis 39:2 states, "The *LORD* was with Joseph, and *he* was a *successful* man" (italics mine). In the world, Joseph did not have money (property); he was a slave (he had no status), and he had no family or friends around him (he had no social groups). He did not have the things by which the world measures success. But God was with Joseph and that made him successful.

For a long time, my feelings of self-worth and definition of success were based on my achievements. I realized that after all my worldly successes, I had no joy or peace within. It became apparent to me that my idea of being successful needed an adjustment. No amount of success in tennis, running, or any other work makes me successful in God's eyes. It is His presence that counts.

The world's measure of success is different from God's. The world measures success by possessions and status, but God measures it according to His presence in our lives.

When He is with me; I am successful.

### **No Longer "Why, God?" but "Thank You, God"**

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (James 1:2-4)

I always heard that there is a reason for everything that happens. I believed it, but after hearing it so many times without finding answers, it became discouraging. I thought, *Surely all good reasons cannot have painful origins? Some things must come easy? Why are things always a struggle?* It was questions for which I did not understand the answers. And I kept wondering where I was going to find the reasons for all my trials. But the truth is I do not know if I ever will find all the reasons.

My life finally turned around when I stopped asking, "Why, God?" and started thanking Him for my life and the fact that I am still here for His specific purpose for my life. The pain subsided when I came to the end of my own efforts and understanding and turned to God. He is the only one who knows everything and the reason why I am alive. He knows why I am still here and the purpose I was made to serve.

So many people suffer pain in this world. Things happen, and we do not know the reasons why. But the truth remains that God is good. He does not bring sickness and destruction, but we are part of a fallen world. We live in its consequences. It is a waste of time to blame God for bad things that happen, because we are only hurting ourselves and keeping ourselves from our only true Comforter. When you reach the point where you do not need to know all the answers but can thank God for everything that you have and the fact that you are still alive, healing takes place.<sup>[34]</sup>

It did not always feel like I was growing while I was in my difficult times, but when I look back now, I can see that God had a perfect plan for my life. He was using each one of those trials to prepare me for the next phase that He had planned for me. Nothing happened by accident.

I learned that God never brought bad things over me. He allowed trials and times of testing to come across my path, but He never allowed something that was too big for me to handle with Him, and He always provided the outcome.<sup>[35]</sup>

I would like to share an amazing reality with you that helped me value the trials we go through in life. Malachi 3:3 says, "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." This verse displays the character and nature of God in a very special way. If you understand the process of refining silver, it makes a lot more sense: The silversmith holds a piece of silver over the fire and lets it heat up. When silver is refined it must be held in the middle of the fire, where the flames are the hottest, in order to burn away all the impurities. When a refiner holds the silver over the fire, he keeps his eye on it the entire time. If the silver is left a moment too long in the flames, it will be destroyed. The silversmith knows the silver is ready when he can see his image reflected in the silver.

The truth of this verse made me appreciate the trials that God sometimes allowed to come across my path. God is my refiner, and I am His piece of silver. Every time that I feel the heat of the fire in my life, I know that God is sitting right there by me. He is holding me and keeping His eye on me, until He sees His image in me. I know that whatever fire I go through in life will make me a better person, because God is watching me. He is working on me, making me into an image of Him in this world.

Some of the trials that I went through were self-imposed. It was not God's purpose for me but rather the consequences of my own decisions. I learned that even when we face unnecessary trials, God is still with us to turn them around for our good. So I started to look at my trials in a different way. I no longer looked at the negative sides but rather at what good God was doing in me through them.<sup>[36]</sup>

### **Resting in God**

There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God *did* from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. (Hebrews 4:9-11)

After the Comrades in 2010, God opened my eyes to what it means to rest in Him. I was going at one hundred kilometers per hour in first gear. I had to slow down, but I did not know how.

I believed that only after I did my part would God do His part. So I always tried to do things myself instead of giving everything to God. He was waiting for me to find my rest in Him. By continuing to work for everything, I did not believe that the grace of God was enough for me.

After many years of trying things my way, it began to make sense to allow God, the Author and Finisher of everything, to do what He intended to do. My ways did not bring me true joy anyway. There were times when I got discouraged and looked at people for answers, but they could not help me. God alone knew what He was busy doing in me. He alone was able to help me understand myself and my situation. I had to trust in Him to give me the solution. My part was to believe that Jesus was more than enough for me. When I did, He came, and through His Holy Spirit, He changed my heart and desires to what He wanted for my life. There was nothing I could do by my own efforts, but believing and trusting in Jesus to make things happen for me turned all the odds in my favor.

God offers me His help to turn around my hopeless situation into one of favor every day. I make it my goal not to rely on my own efforts and performances but to rest in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. Jesus has done every piece of work on the cross that I will ever need to do in the flesh. He has already provided for me in every situation. I just need to come into His rest by trusting and believing in His finished work.

### **A Perfect Body in Christ**

I was never happy with the way I looked. I was never fat, but I was not where I wanted to be. In my eyes, there was always room for me to lose more weight because I felt I was never skinny enough. My way of losing weight was always eating healthier and exercising harder. I never liked the idea of dieting; rather, I wanted a healthy lifestyle that would be sustainable.

In January of 2012, a new revelation of Jesus' grace was opened up to me. I realized that His grace is enough to give me the perfectly healthy body I always wanted. However, I had to make a choice about if I was going to continue to work for it through my own efforts or if I was going to accept that I could receive it from Jesus. My healthy body was not outside the reach of His grace, but I had a choice to make to stop limiting

Him.

As long as I continued relying on my own efforts, God could not help me, because He works in grace that is activated by my faith in Him. My mind had to be renewed to trust in Jesus to give me the perfect size body. It was no longer my efforts that determined the outcome; it was my faith in Jesus that became the deciding factor. It did not matter so much anymore what I ate or what I did but where I put my faith. This was really hard for me to understand because it was just not the way life had taught me. I was used to doing my part first and then letting God do His part.

I decided to put my faith in Jesus and trust in Him. Within a couple of weeks, I realized that my thoughts were no longer occupied with food and exercising but rather with constant reminders of Jesus' grace that provides for me. My confession for a perfectly healthy body followed my faith. I declared that my body was slimming down and that I was healthy in Jesus Christ, and my body really was slimming down without any conscious efforts on my side. For the first time in my life, I was eating more comfortably, without feeling guilty (because I realized that Jesus' grace is bigger than my eating), and I was exercising less than half the amount of time I was before.

I had such mind-blowing relief when I realized that it no longer depended on my efforts and acts of "being good" but entirely on the grace of God. Every day I continued to declare God's grace over my life and my healthy body that I was receiving from Christ through faith. I then trust God to show me the way to go.

This was not a quick-fix to a healthy body but a continuing act of faith out of my relationship with Christ. I could not achieve a lasting healthy body by my own efforts but only through faith in God's grace for my life.

### **I Am the Righteousness of God in Christ**

For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Today, as a believer in Jesus as my Savior, I am the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ because of His finished work on the cross. For a long time, I knew this truth but did not really believe it, and I did not live it. The truth always remained, but I missed out on the blessing that lies within it for me.

When I stopped trying to earn my worth through self-effort and started claiming my righteousness through Jesus, the picture I had of myself changed drastically. I no longer needed performances or people to build up my self-esteem. I knew who I was because of Jesus. It took away all the pressure on me to be someone I could never be by myself. Instead, I allowed God to perform His works through me and complete His plan in me. <sup>[37]</sup>

I now understand that God's favor is mine by His grace, and there is nothing that I have done to deserve it or could do to lose it; it is God's gift to me. God sees me through the eyes of the cross. He sees Jesus as perfect, and therefore, I am perfect. Nothing I do and nothing anyone says matter. I just have to make that picture my own on a daily basis.

I am now as Jesus is in this world (1 John 4:17). I am the righteousness of God in Jesus. God enables me to fulfill His plans for me. He loves me with an everlasting love, and it does not matter what I do. By the grace of God, I cannot lose my identity in Him because my identity is established in Christ, and He is always the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

## Chapter 8

### **Finding Love in God's Hand**

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV)

Every girl wants a fairy tale—your prince on his white horse, sweeping you off your feet, rescuing you from your life, and taking you to Neverland to live happily ever after. I always thought that only happened in movies, but the reality awaiting me was far better than any fairy tale any movie could offer.

I always told myself that God had someone appointed for me, someone who was better than anyone I could ever imagine for myself. And my mother always said that God was going to give me an amazing husband, a man who would meet all the desires of my heart. Little did I know how true her words would be.

When people asked me why I was still single, all I could say was that I was waiting for the right person to come along in God's timing. I met some really nice men, but after spending some time with God, it became clear they were not meant for me. I realized that if I was going to follow God's voice to the man He prepared for me, I would have to ignore any advice given by the world.

Sometimes I became discouraged, like any young girl with dreams of her prince, but I just kept reminding myself that God was in control. I was happy with my life, but I wanted to share my special moments with the one I love.

I surrendered everything to God and prayed that He would send me the right husband, at the right time, and I asked for patience to wait on Him. I had peace inside of me, and every time I started to get discouraged or impatient, I would remind myself of the fact that I asked God for the right person at the right time.

In January of 2011, when I was twenty-six, God's time arrived. He set the table for me to meet my husband. Ours is a story carefully written by God, and the timing was perfect.

I always thought I knew what I wanted, but when I received God's blessing, I realized that He gave me more than what I expected. God thought of every little detail and left nothing out. He gave me someone to compliment me in every aspect of my life.

We often expect God to give us something in a certain way, but when it arrives in a different package than we envisioned, we might miss it. We should let go of our expectations and trust in God that He will give us whatever we need. We should not let our own limited expectations withhold us from God's best for us.

God does not give a person something without preparing that person to receive it. In most instances, there is a refining process in place to make one grow and develop in God's will. God does not want anyone to stagnate. He wants everyone to draw closer to Him on a daily basis.

When I met my husband-to-be, it was a meeting so well planned by God that we could not deny His hand in it. We both enjoyed exercising, and I wanted someone to teach me the finer ropes of swimming. He wanted a running partner. He was a good swimmer; I was a good runner. Our mothers had been friends for many years, and because of their input, we arranged to meet one morning to exercise together. From the

very first moment that we met, I knew he was God's appointed man for me. The rest was history.

There was a huge learning and development process in store for us. God took us on a very exciting path. We had to grow towards one another and closer to Him. Everything did not come easily, but we always knew that we needed to push through together, with God as our foundation. He had something even better in store for us.

After we dated for ten and a half months, he asked me to marry him, and I said, "Yes!" We were engaged for a little over three months before we tied the knot. It was the best decision I've ever made, and we were and are excited to receive the blessings that God has in store for us. Each step became an opportunity for us to get to know one another better and move closer to each other. At the same time, we experienced growth in our relationship with God.

Never sell yourself short or think that there is nothing better for you or that you must settle for second best. God has the best in store for you, and He will give it to you if you just wait for His perfect time. He wants you to receive your spouse from Him. I learned that by waiting, God prepared my husband and me in a very special way for each other. If we had met each other too soon, we would have had to work a lot harder, but by waiting on God for His moment, we were walking in His grace and experiencing His abundance.

It is so encouraging for us to know that we are never alone and God is always with us. No situation or challenge is ever too big for God to deal with, and He always has a plan. The lessons that I have learned about God, relationships, and love during the short time that I have had with my husband so far have been amazing, and we know the best is yet to come!

## Epilogue

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called *you* by your name; You *are* Mine.  
(Isaiah 43:1)

I often wondered, *Why am I here? What am I supposed to do? Where is my life heading? Why was I born into this world?* These are questions for which the answers seem to come so easily for some people, but for me, it was a continuous battle. What I have learned is that it was always worth waiting on God's answers.

I wrote the following poem about my thoughts on why I am here.

### **Why am I here?**

Lord Jesus, You know Your purpose for me.  
You planned me before the foundation of this world.  
Your love for me exceeds all understanding.  
It defines me.  
I am here to worship You.  
I am here to love You—  
to be Your hands and feet,  
to be Your voice to this broken world.  
Enable me to fulfill Your will, as I cannot out of myself.  
Your grace equips and empowers me.  
Lord, I know it is not about me, but about You and only You.  
Guide me and help me to be obedient to Your voice.  
It is only through You that I can find and fulfill my purpose in life.

You might not understand what you are meant to do, but one thought I want to leave you with is this: God chose you as His child, and at this very moment, you are meant to be here. You still have a purpose in this life. Every one of us has a very specific purpose to fulfill on earth, but depending on the decisions we make, we may follow detours that delay our arrival at our predetermined purpose in life.

The treasures you are hunting are hidden in having a personal relationship with Jesus. Its value is indescribable. It is a relationship in which you become less so that Jesus can become more in your life. He is our Provider in everything we need in life. Giving all the time tires us, but it does not tire Jesus. His resources are unending. And the more we receive from Him, the more life is produced in us.

The more you walk in a constant receiving of God's grace, the more there will be a richer supply of His grace in you. It is not a relationship about what you can do for Him but what you can receive from Him. The more time you spend with Jesus, the closer you move towards Him and experience His greatness in your life.

Galatians 2:20 says, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." The day you decide to give your life to Jesus, you decide to sacrifice your flesh on a daily basis so that Jesus can live through you. You have to become less so that Jesus can become more in your life. As a result of the great cost Jesus paid on the cross, it is a really easy decision for us. Although the sacrifice you make in the world to follow Jesus is great, the rewards are much greater.

You receive an eternal relationship with Jesus, who loves you so much that He gave His life for you, and your soul is blessed with an unshakable peace.<sup>[38]</sup>

When the Spirit of God comes to work through you, He assists you in taking up the position that God has set aside for you.<sup>[39]</sup> Through the Holy Spirit, you are able to love people with the love of God that is shed abroad in your heart.<sup>[40]</sup> You are able to worship God in the way He deserves to be worshipped. You are able to forgive the ones who wronged you so that your peace cannot be stolen by the deeds done by others to you. And you can be used by God as He meant for you to be used.

Jesus came to give us life and in abundance. He wants to bless you continuously, and there is no ending to the blessings He has in store for you.<sup>[41]</sup> He understands that the devil wants to destroy you and take away from you, but we can take comfort in knowing that the God who is in us is much greater than the devil.<sup>[42]</sup>

Psalms 91:1 states, "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."<sup>[43]</sup> We all love to be safe and know that we are outside the reach of danger. Well, there is such a place in Jesus. When you make a choice to walk inside His will for your life, you are protected, you are equipped, you are guided, and you are provided for so you can operate in the perfect will of God. It is the safest place you can be. Nothing the devil plots against you will take you out of God's protection. The devil might keep on trying, but nothing can come through the shield of protection that the blood and favor of Jesus places around His children. How awesome is it to know that you have a personal Protector whenever you need Him? You just need to call out to Him.

Jesus is the reason why I am still here today to share His greatness with you. He is the One who stood by me every second of my trials. He gave me hope and encouraged me. He knew about all the glory that awaits me at the finish line.

You might not have considered Jesus in such a way, but here is a chance for you to consider Him again. You have a lot more to gain with Jesus than to lose, but the choice is yours!

### **Invitation for Seasons with Jesus**

And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. (Acts 16:30-32)<sup>[44]</sup>

If you want to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior today, please pray this prayer: "Lord Jesus, I thank you for Your perfect work on the cross. I accept You as my Lord and Savior. I have been washed clean by Your blood and can now stand in Your righteousness before God. Thank you for Your perfect will for my life, and I thank you that You will bring it to pass. I cover myself with the blood of Jesus and meditate on His presence in my life. I pray that the anointing of Your Holy Spirit will overflow in my life every day. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen."

### **A Thought for the Road Ahead**

There is nothing you have to do to earn Jesus' love. You just need to accept Him as your Lord and Savior. Continue to receive from Jesus every day by spending time with

Him in His Word and through prayer. He knows your every need, and His heart is yearning to be your loving Father. Walk in His presence of favor, and let Him bless you in His grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so no-one can boast" (NIV).

May you be blessed in Christ Jesus!

### **Note from Author**

Thank you for reading my book. If you are looking for more, please visit [www.seasonswithchrist.com](http://www.seasonswithchrist.com).

If you would like to connect with me:

**Follow me on Twitter:** <http://twitter.com/MR2603>

**Like us on Facebook:** <http://facebook.com/seasonswithchrist>

**Subscribe to my blog:** [www.seasonswithchrist.com/blog](http://www.seasonswithchrist.com/blog)

Thanks!

Maretha Retief

## Endnotes

### **Chapter 2 – Dying to Self to Live in Christ**

[1] Titus 3:2: "...to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men."

[2] Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

[3] 1 Peter 1:23: "...having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever."

[4] John 16:33: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

[5] 1 Corinthians 15:36 (NIV): "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies."

[6] Numbers 6:24–26: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace."

[7] 1 Corinthians 4:3–4: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord."

[8] Hebrews 12:1–2: "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

### **Chapter 3 – The Ebb and Flow of My Insecurities**

[9] 2 Corinthians 12:9: "And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

[10] Matthew 6:34: "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for today is its own trouble."

### **Chapter 4 – Climbing My Mountain to God's Will**

[11] Proverbs 29:23: "A man's pride will bring him low, But the humble in spirit will retain honor."

[12] Psalms 127:1: "Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; ..."

[13] Ecclesiastes 3:12–13: "I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God."

[14] Galatians 1:10 (NIV): "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of

God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ."

[15] 1 Corinthians 9:24–27: "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."

## **Chapter 5 – Seeds of Purpose**

[16] John 8:36: "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

[17] Isaiah 55:8–9: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

[18] Jeremiah 29:11(NIV): "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

[19] 1 John 2:27: "But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him."

[20] Romans 5:20: "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more,"

[21] Matthew 3:13–17 (The Message): "Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you!" But Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So John did it. The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."

[22] Romans 6:4: "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

## **Chapter 6 – A Second Chance in God's Fountain of Grace**

[23] Romans 8:11 (NIV): "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you."

[24] Revelation 12:10 (The Message): "Then I heard a strong voice out of Heaven saying, Salvation and power are established! Kingdom of our God, authority of his Messiah! The Accuser of our brothers and sisters thrown out, who accused them day and night before God."

Also, 1 John 2:1–2 (NIV): "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the

Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

[25] John 11:4 (NASB): "But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it."

[26] Romans 8:28 (NIV): "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

## **Chapter 7 – The Fruits of My Journey**

[27] Revelations 12:17: "And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." See also Genesis 3:16-24.

[28] Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

[29] Matthew 16:24–26: "Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

[30] Revelations 3:7–8 (NIV): "These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut."

[31] Romans 8:18: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

[32] Read also 2 Corinthians 10:12: "For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise."

[33] Matthew 7:12 (NIV): "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, ..."

[34] 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

[35] 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV): "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

[36] 1 Peter 1:7 (NIV): "These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

[37] Philippians 1:6 (NIV): "...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

## **Epilogue**

[38] John 14:27: Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

[39] See 1 John 2:27 as quoted above.

[40] Romans 5:5: "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

[41] John 10:10: "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."

[42] 1 John 4:4: "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."

[43] Read also Psalm 91:11–12: "For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest [in case that] you dash your foot against a stone."

[44] Hebrews 3:7: "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness."