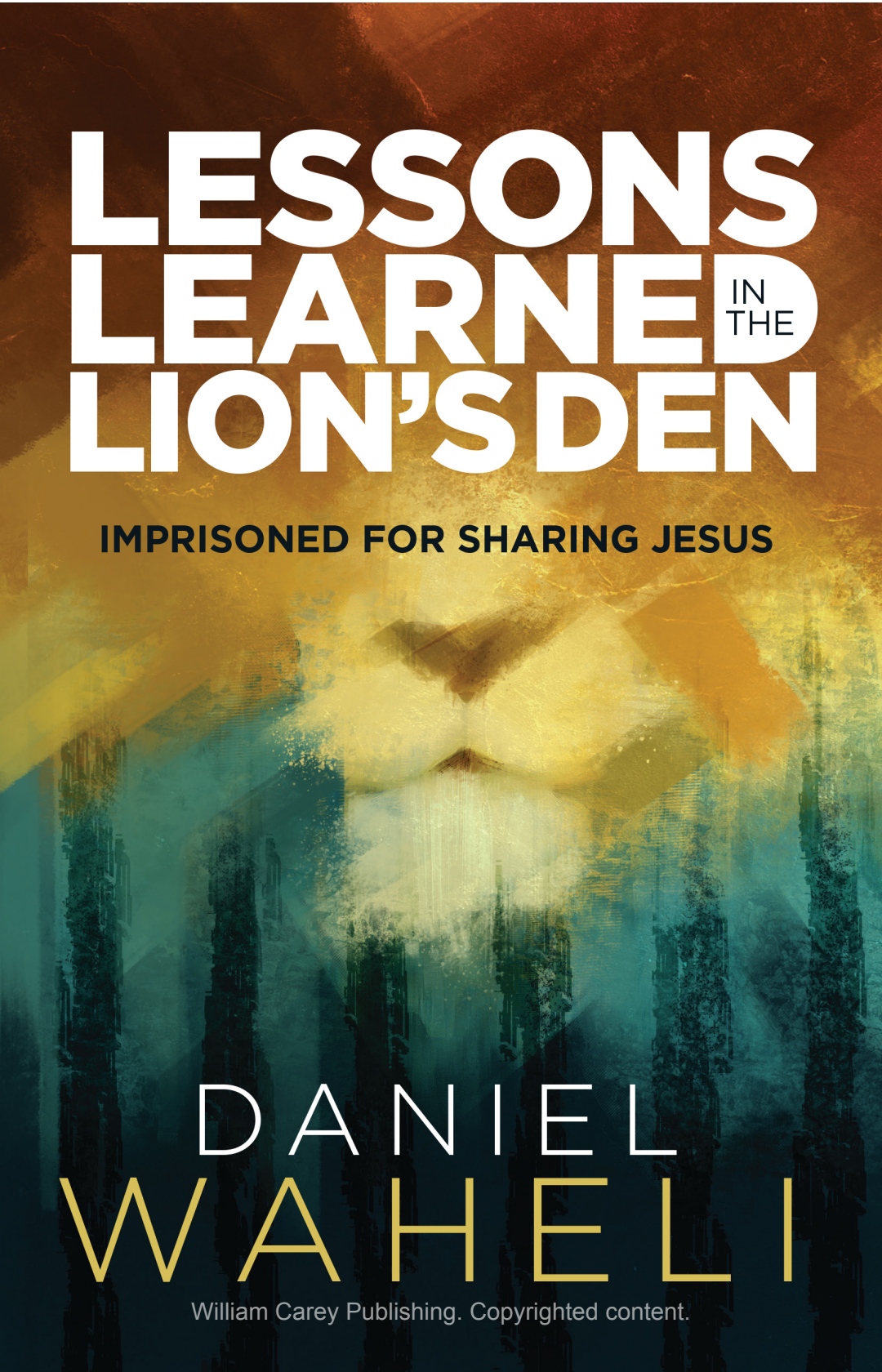


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Lessons Learned in the Lion's Den: Imprisoned for Sharing Jesus
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CALLING

I grew up in Europe, and my family attended a local evangelical church. I first heard about missions in Africa when a missionary couple shared their story at my youth group. I was moved when I saw pictures of African children and felt for the first time the Holy Spirit drawing me to missions. I was fourteen years old when this happened, and though I was walking with the Lord, my commitment to Him was not very strong.

I moved on with life and studied business and administration. When I finished my studies, my friend and I had three months before we had to start our mandatory military service. Initially, we wanted to have some fun and travel around the world. In the end, however, we decided to do some mission work in Africa also. We spent most of our time in a mission hospital doing administrative and practical tasks. While I appreciated and saw the eternal value of their work, it was clear to me that this was not something I wanted to do with my life. I learned that I wanted to be directly involved in church planting among unreached peoples. I went home with a deep love for Africa and a desire to return and share the good news with people who had never had a chance to hear the gospel.

When I returned to Europe, I had some great opportunities to pursue a professional career in my home country. I told God if He wanted me to dedicate my life to cross-cultural missions among unreached peoples, He would need to direct me clearly. I began to feel a subtle but constant discontentment with the knowledge that there are people in the world who have never heard the gospel. I read biographies and books about missionaries who went to

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unreached peoples. The more I learned about cross-cultural ministry, the more the excitement in my heart grew. In spite of all of this, I still was not sure if this was the way the Lord wanted me to invest my life.

In 1990, I decided to devote a week to seeking God's will for my life by attending a mission's conference. There were more than 150 mission agencies represented that all needed people, but I did not feel the call of the Lord to join one of them. I needed to hear from the Lord directly, so I took a day away from the conference to pray and fast. But I did not hear anything from the Lord about missions. I thought I knew His will and planned to go back and pursue my professional career. On the last night of the conference, the speaker said that the Lord had told him that there were people in the room that the Lord wanted to call for overseas missions and that He would make their calling clear that night. When I heard those words, it was like God Himself spoke to me. I wanted to stand up and say, "Yes, here I am. I am willing to go." I was so touched by his introductory words that I didn't hear anything else that he said that night. I responded to God with a commitment to cross-cultural missions. My heart overflowed with joy, and I praised the Lord for speaking to me. I went home, quit my job, and started preparing to go back to Africa long term.

I signed up for a YWAM (Youth with a Mission)* discipleship school in Togo (West Africa). This is a school where young people get theoretical training in a classroom for three months, and then they spend three months doing outreach in another country. In preparation for my trip, I spent three months in Northern France to improve my French. While I was there, I also learned how to fast and pray for unreached peoples in Africa. One morning I felt that I should ask the Lord where in Africa I should do the outreach portion of my training. Later that day, a woman who worked in Mali (West Africa) spoke to our group. While she was speaking I said to the Lord in my heart, "If you want me to spend part of my time in Mali, then please send her to me after her talk, and let her invite me to go to Mali." When she finished her talk, she came right over to me and asked me if I wanted to go to Mali to work there. Surprised, I said, "Yes, I would." Later that evening, the older missionary couple with whom I was staying thought I would be interested in a prayer letter that they had received from a missionary couple in Mali. It was as if God was confirming what had happened earlier that morning through this letter when I saw the phrase, "The Lord has spoken today very clearly

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to you, go to Mali . . .” At that moment, I told the Lord that I was ready and willing to go there.

After I finished my language training in France, I went to Togo to start my YWAM school. I was excited about the first three months during which we would receive teaching during the week and do outreach on the weekends. On our outreaches, we gave our testimonies, did dramas in churches, and even preached the word of God in churches and on the streets. This was the kind of work I felt the Holy Spirit wanted me to pursue—sharing the good news with people and church planting.

After the first three months of classroom training at the Togo discipleship school, we began the process of praying about where to do the three months of outreach. Our leader felt from the Lord that we should go to three different places, one of which was Mali. The leader prayed for each student, and he put me in the Mali group. I told the leader that I was excited to go to Mali, but that I didn't have a visa and couldn't get one where we were in Togo. He said that he had prayed about this and that I should just go and not worry about the visa.

In Togo, we had worked with animists* and saw many people come to the Lord in dramatic ways. Our three-month outreach, however, started with a few weeks in Burkina Faso. This was our first time in a Muslim* village. Since Burkina Faso is a country that extends religious freedom to its people, we shared the gospel openly with the whole village present. When I preached, I talked about Revelation 21 and 22 describing the beauty of heaven. When I asked the people who would like to live in such a place, the whole village raised their hands. With joyful expectation, I explained what Jesus did to open the door for us to enter heaven. When I asked who would like to follow Jesus, not one person raised his hand. I was shocked. Had I done something wrong? Was there sin in my life that was impeding the work of the Holy Spirit? John, my translator, encouraged me to share the message again since the people might not have understood. Their reaction was the same the second time. John asked me to share it again a third time. I agreed to do it but was very embarrassed that no one was responding. After the third altar call with no response, I felt humiliated. I gave the microphone to John and disappeared into the darkness. I asked the Lord what I had done wrong, but He did not give me an answer. After a while, I went back to the place and was surprised to find that the people were still there. John had urged them to go home, but

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they stayed. They said that they would like to believe in Jesus, but they were unwilling to leave their tribe or endure persecution. We then had to leave the village, and people started to go home. That evening, the Holy Spirit spoke very clearly to my heart again. He said, "I want you to go and share the good news with Muslims. I love them and I want to save them. Are you willing to follow Me and go to the places I will show you?" I told the Lord that I was willing, but I would need His help and guidance. At that point in my life, I knew very little about Islam.

After two weeks, we moved on to the border of Mali. I asked the Lord what I should say and do when we arrived at the border. When we came to the border, we didn't even have to stop the car. It was a miracle. God opened the door for me to enter Mali. I got my visa easily at the police office the next day in one of the larger towns. I spent the next several months sharing the gospel with Muslims and realized that a race with God on the mission field is very exciting. He can open doors when they seem to be closed. The Lord told me that He is the boss of this work and that my job is to follow Him wherever He guides me.

When I left Mali, I realized that I needed more training and knowledge about working among Muslims. So I spent the next three years in Europe preparing for a long-term career overseas by going to Bible school and getting a bachelor's degree in missions and church planting. During this time, the Lord tested me to see if I was really willing to follow Him wherever He would lead.

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