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Hi, my name is Maria and this is my story.

It all started when I was about 5 years old. The sexual abuse began at 5 and it didn't end until I was about 16. Our household was volatile; my dad drank a lot and my mom worked a lot. They both worked, but he was physically violent toward her and really hard on us. We were four kids, actually five now. When the abuse started, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't say anything. I can't even explain exactly how I felt as a 5-year-old kid; you don't know what to do or say. However, by the time I was about 8, my grandmother caught the person in the act while I was asleep. She told my parents and the only thing my dad said was, 'Don't be changing your clothes in front of this person.' I was like, 'Okay.' But the abuse continued and another person came into our lives and he was molesting me. There was really nothing I could do because I was already conditioned to what they were doing to me.

So about 8 or 9 years old, that's when it happened. It continued; it never stopped. Once my mom found out that it was still happening, she beat me and she beat that person too. Someone else in the family completely destroyed me that day. I'll never forget it; they called me a filthy pig. I believe that day I died emotionally. I gave up on life and was just going through the motions. The violence continued whether I liked it or not. By the time I was 12 years old, I started smoking marijuana to escape. The abuse continued and I didn't know how to handle it. When you have your first crush and you're excited, I never experienced anything like that. I didn't have any healthy boundaries; I thought sex was how you show someone that you care.

So it just continued to escalate. I started drinking when I was introduced to liquor, hitting it harder. By the time I was 16 or 17, I was fully addicted to alcohol and marijuana. I started doing coke, mixing it with marijuana, which we called Primos in the joints we smoked. Any chance I got, I would get high because I didn't want to think, remember, or feel. I got numb; I had no emotions. I stopped crying because I was told crying is a sign of weakness. I held on to that and stopped crying. I would party so hard that I wouldn't remember what I did or what happened. I hurt a lot of people along the way; hurt people hurt people.

When I was around 17, I had a lot of physical issues and was told I had PCOS, which made it practically impossible to have children. Telling a 17-year-old that just stacked onto all the problems I had. I threw caution to the wind and kept partying, getting into fights, wreaking havoc. I felt like I wasn't worth anything; I didn't matter to anyone. Fast forward to 22, I was really deep into drugs, smoking what we called sherm (PCP) a lot. I got involved in gang life; I lived with a lot of gang members and did a lot of gang-related stuff.

I found out I was pregnant when I was 5 months along. This child went through a lot with me because I was still smoking dope, PCP, and drinking. When I found out I was pregnant, I laughed, but it was sad. I went to the hospital for a swollen foot and they ran tests, including a pregnancy test. I thought it would come out negative; I couldn't have kids. But they told me I was positive. I was shocked. As soon as they did the ultrasound, my son started moving. I thought, 'Oh my God, how is this kid going to come out? I've done so many drugs and drinking.' I considered putting him up for adoption. It was a battlefield in my mind. I didn't know God then, but I see now that He was already working.

I found out I was pregnant in August 1993 and had my son on December 13, 1993. He was a tiny little thing and normal, with no problems. He's my miracle baby and now he is 30 years old, married with two children, so I'm a grandma. This is part of the reason I'm sharing my story; the curse ends with me and they will not suffer what I suffered because my God is in the midst of it all.

At 22 with a newborn, I didn't know what to do. Postpartum was crazy, but I dealt with it. Being a single parent wasn't easy. Fast forward, we left California and moved to a little town named Anthony in New Mexico with my parents because I had nowhere to go. That was in '94. I was still having issues. Jump to 26; this is where it really starts. At 26, I was battling a lot of depression and anxiety. I was still drinking, but not as heavily as before. I stopped smoking PCP and marijuana, but I was drinking more and smoking cigarettes. That was my vice. I was getting ready to leave my son with my mom because I felt like I wasn't a good mom, that I wasn't worthy to have a child.

Then one day, she invited me to church and to a youth retreat. I was 26, but the pastors took a liking to me and encouraged me to go. I thought I was too old for this, but I went. I was walking with a girl I knew, smoking my cigarettes, and I was never judged. That weekend, I gave my life to the Lord. I thought that was it, but it was just the beginning of my journey. I struggled a lot in that church because it was predominantly Hispanic and being a single mother, they were wary

of me. They thought I wanted to take their men. They didn't trust me and shunned my son and me, but I kept going because I needed God.

I struggled with depression and trauma; I didn't know I had PTSD until years later. I got married to the wrong person; it got violent. He was a narcissist, and I just wanted my son to have a father figure. In my desperation, I married the wrong person. It lasted three years and we divorced. I met my husband on a Christian chat line. I told him I wasn't looking for a relationship, just a friend. We met in person the day my divorce was final. God works in mysterious ways; he told me God showed him all my baggage and that I was going to be his wife. It took us four years to get married because I was still hurt and dealing with my past.

We got married on July 7, 2007. He is my best friend and God used him to help me heal. When I wanted to die, he said, 'You're going to live.' When I wanted to give up, he picked me up. I didn't know how to communicate; I was completely down. My dad was hard on us, and when we got in trouble, the belt would come out. I shut down. My husband used wisdom to get me talking. It took many years to get where I'm at. One day, barely married for a year, I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it never did. I realized I was making my husband pay for what others did to me. I even asked my son for forgiveness for bringing people into his life that hurt him. He forgave me right away.

I struggled with walking with God while dealing with depression and insecurities. I gained a lot of weight; food was my comfort. I kept pushing through. I wanted to give up until one trip back to California. We drove by where I used to live and I started sharing my story with my husband. A few months later, I was at Lee County Prison doing ministry and preparing to lead worship. As I got up, I was reminded of that day at the restaurant. The Lord spoke to me, saying, 'You took me back to where it all started so I can heal.'

He took me to 2 Kings chapter 6 about the prophet who helped the young prophet get the axe head back. I use that scripture a lot because that's how God did it for me. He took me back to where it all started. I thought I was healed, but it was just the beginning of my healing journey. I finally broke down and told my husband I couldn't do this anymore. He asked if I needed help. I thought, 'I'm a Christian; I'm supposed to be fine.' That's a lie from the enemy. When I sought help, God sent me a godly woman to counsel me. I was with her for about two years.

In 2019, I lost my dad and was angry because we never got closure. We weren't on talking terms. When I did talk to him, he was in the hospital and warned me he was going on a

ventilator. I thought he would be fine, but he passed three weeks later. I was angry because I felt like he threw me away when my parents had my baby sister. He got another chance to do it right with her. I finally said, 'I release you, Daddy. I let go. I forgive you.'

I learned that I have forgiven but haven't forgotten. The memories come, but they don't hurt me anymore. I can share my story with others who are dealing with the same demons. I didn't know how to get out of the hole I dug for myself, but God knows. He threw down that ladder and stretched out His hand. It's time to let Him in so He can heal you completely and use you for His glory. There's freedom in letting go of hurt, pain, resentment, and bitterness. If I could say something to my younger self, it would be to hold on because help is on the way. You are beautiful, worthy, and loved. Jesus is more than enough for me. I'm alive and well, a walking testimony of what God can do. I am more than enough because He is my Creator and my Father.

I'm Maria, and Jesus is enough. If this testimony has touched your heart and caused you to question your salvation or what eternity looks like for you, I encourage you to find out about Jesus. It's free; there's nothing you have to do. Grace has been given through His blood on the cross. All you have to do is believe, receive, and confess. If your heart has been tenderized by this testimony, that is God giving you the opportunity to meet with Him today. Let's pray together. Close your eyes and say this prayer with me: 'Father God, I thank you that you are Lord. I thank you that you care about me and that you died on the cross for my sins. Thank you, Jesus. I ask that you come into my heart and save me. Change my life for the better. Send the right people into my life to help me further my relationship with you. In Jesus' name, amen.' If you said this prayer, I assure you, you will be in heaven with Jesus. Link yourself up with fellow believers in your community and begin to serve. See how God changes the trajectory of your life. Thank you for joining us today, and we hope you tune in to the next testimony. God bless."