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ZACH WILLIAMS

Zach Williams was born and raised in a small town outside Jonesboro, Arkansas, not unlike Andy Griffith's Mayberry or a scene from *Goonies*. Williams grew up in a home filled with loving parents who created a safe world for him to live in, surrounded by family members and neighbors who encouraged him. Yet the safety and security of that childhood seemed like a distant memory as Williams watched his life spiral out of control over a decade later.

"My childhood was amazing. I had awesome parents who, at an early age, instilled in me what it was to follow the Lord. My dad led worship in churches and my mom sang on praise teams. My childhood was almost storybook, you could say. They would always tell me I could do all things through Christ who strengthens me, and I can still remember to this day how supportive they were of everything I did," shares Williams.

With a desire to follow in his father's footsteps, a young Williams began pursuing sports with the hope he might become the kind of standout basketball player his father was years ago during his own high school career. Turns out, Williams carried a similar talent to his father and before he knew it, the basketball star was being watched and pursued by scouts from various colleges. While things continued to look up for the star athlete, Williams started playing Russian Roulette with his future by dabbling with alcohol and experimenting with drugs. It wasn't long before his poor choices cost him everything he had been working towards as he bid farewell to his division I scholarship.

In spite of the major setback, Williams decided to go to college anyway and continued to play basketball in a men's intramural league. Through a chance meeting, Williams was able to try out for a college team in Northwest Arkansas and clenched a full-ride scholarship. What seemed like a promising future took another nosedive as Williams began partying with the other athletes trying to outdo each other in various late-night shenanigans involving drugs and alcohol. Before he played his first game, Williams busted his ankle and sat out the entire first season.

And that's when music came into the picture.

Explains Williams, "Breaking my ankle ended up being a blessing and a curse: Sports were my life and I thought that's where I wanted to be, but music gave me an opportunity to do something different with my life. My roommate brought a guitar with him to college so I decided to teach myself how to play. My dad played music growing up but I was never interested in playing an instrument until that moment. Playing guitar felt so natural and I fell in love with it. I started writing songs and sports took a back seat. I knew what I wanted to do with my life."

After college, Williams moved back home and continued playing music for anybody and everybody who would lend an ear. He also continued to nurture his love affair with drugs and alcohol, finding the musician's lifestyle more conducive to bad habits.

"I knew I had a problem but I justified it. I was working for my dad's construction company at the time and I told myself that as long as I could go to work and get the job done, it didn't matter what I did at night," says Williams.

By his late twenties, Williams experienced both a marriage and a divorce. He also became the front man for a rock band, which quickly took off after the release of their first album. A booking agent was secured and the band began touring heavily in the States as well as Europe. Williams embraced the rock star lifestyle wholeheartedly, doing his best to bury his unhappiness with the growing success of his band. "I finally had gotten to where I wanted to be and there were even more drugs and alcohol in the picture," shares Williams. "I would take anything and everything that you gave me, and was always the first guy ready to jump into the craziness and the last to go home. I went 100% at whatever I was doing and got really good at doing that with my bad habits, unfortunately."

As the notoriety of his band grew, so did the conviction that change needed to happen. Newly remarried with two stepchildren, Williams was encouraged by his bride, Crystal, to seek help. Wildly aware of his problem, he came face to face with the fact he needed help, but fear proved to be a serious hurdle that caused him to run in the opposite direction. Then, the encouragement to change his lifestyle was reinforced with a doctor's diagnosis.

"I had a scare in 2011 that caused me to take a break. I found out I had some early stages of cancer in my esophagus. The doctor told me, 'The way you're living - you've got to quit or it's going to kill you.' It scared me, but instead of quitting, I sunk deeper and deeper into depression, drugs and alcohol. I just continued to live that way for another year until something inside of me started to change."

The catalyst for that change started with an invitation. A band mate started attending church and began talking with him about it, so he and Crystal began attending the same church and found open arms and acceptance, something they were not expecting. They began plugging into as many activities and opportunities as possible and Williams' lifestyle started changing, but it wasn't until he went back on the road that he made a complete 180.

"The guy driving our bus was scanning the radio and Big Daddy Weave's 'Redeemed' came on the radio," he shares. "I immediately knew the song because I worked construction with my dad for almost 15 years and every day on the job we listened to Christian radio. I'd also been listening to Petra, Keith Green and Russ Taff my whole life, so it was really a part of my DNA." That day when Williams heard the lyrics to "Redeemed," he said, "The Holy Spirit spoke to me in that moment, saying 'You need to quit doing what you're doing and turn your life around.' That was a turning point for me. I called my wife and told her I was coming home. I was quitting the band, we are going to cancel the rest of our shows, and that was it."

Williams' literal and figurative homecoming was full of confession, repentance and forgiveness with God as well as his family. They continued to immerse themselves in the life of their church and together Williams and his wife were baptized right before their fourth child was born.

Zach Williams eventually became the campus director and worship leader of Central Baptist's new campus in Jonesboro. Over time, doors opened for him to write songs with Jonathan Smith and Mia Fieldes. That led to the three of them to write "Chain Breaker," a tribute to the goodness of God in our lives. The song has not only stayed No. 1 at radio for multiple weeks in a row and on numerous charts, it's also earned Williams his first GRAMMY® nomination (for Best Pop/Contemporary Christian Song at the 59th Annual GRAMMY Awards, to be held in February). But beyond the accolades and topping the radio charts, for Williams it's about reaching people. It's about being honest, it's about the impact - and redemption - that music can bring.

"I did the whole rock star thing for so long and I felt like I was always faking it, and now I really just want to be real with people," he explains. "Please don't wait another minute, make the decision today to follow Christ. I wished I would've done it 20 years ago. I wished I would've never gotten into drugs and alcohol and all that came with it. If you don't know what you're doing with your life then find a quiet place, fall down on your hands and knees, and ask God to come in and save your life. Surrender everything to Him. Jesus came and died on the cross so there would be a way for the chains of those struggles and addictions to be broken. **If you have pain he's a pain taker, if you're lost He is the way maker, and if you've got chains, he's the chain breaker.** The first step is allowing him to come in so he can set you free."

The *Chain Breaker* ten-song LP is out now on Essential Records. Featuring the title track, along with newly penned songs such as "Survivor," "My Liberty," "Fear Is A Liar" and more, the album can be found at iTunes now. The physical album version will be available in January when he is on tour. Williams will join Big Daddy Weave on the road from January through March, and he will then embark on Chris Tomlin's Worship Night In America Tour beginning in April.