

My Friend Luis

Episode 6 — “Over the Wall”

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LUIS: Now, when I got to the other side, there were already officers waiting for me. There's like an area big enough for two cars to drive by at the same time. There's a second fence. I remember running through the officers and took off and climbed the second wall and landed on the other side. They were in awe. I remember one of the officers screaming at the other ones, "What is it? What is it?"

WAYNE: Hi, I'm Wayne Jacobsen, and this is My Friend Luis — the story of one of the most engaging men I've ever met, and of the friendship that developed between us. It has transformed both of our lives and left us in grateful awe at the adventure of life on this little planet.

We began this story on the night of December 19th, 1994, with 21-year-old Luis trying to cross the border back into the U.S. He had no idea how much things had changed in Tijuana that led to his capture and assault by the police. In episode one, we left him beneath the wall, freezing and covered in sewage. He'd just discovered a handwritten note on a piece of paper that turned a painful, terrifying night into a celebration of unmitigated joy. But he still hopes to cross the border and get back to his family in the United States. Let's pick up the story where the indigent people amassed on the border are making fun of him because of the euphoric moment that has overtaken him.

LUIS: I continued to read the note, over and over and over. And I continued to cry and cry and cry. I don't know what time it was by then. All of a sudden, I heard this voice — the same voice that told me "stop" when the police officers were chasing me. That same voice, this time, He called me, and He said: "Come to me." But He called me from beyond the fence.

I don't know if you've seen this fence, but it's not an ordinary fence. That fence was at least 25 feet high, and on the top it curves, and then it has this pointy things, like a spear, on the top. On the curve, they place barbed wire. It's really dense and thick, the barbed wire on top. But the thing is that where it curves, it curves into the canal. So it's no longer 25 feet. If you fall down, you're going to fall up to 50 or 60 feet, maybe more, because the canal goes down.

So I start hearing — I hear it three times, and I knew that it was my Father calling me back to Him. I remember looking around, and I didn't know why at the time, but there was an old jacket in there. So I remember walking towards it. I remember wrapping it around my waist. I don't know why. And then I remember closing my eyes, looking towards the wall — that tall, mighty wall. I looked at it, and it seemed to me like nothing.

I remember running towards the wall. When I was running towards the wall, the people, all the homeless, they saw me and heard all of that, because I was crying. I was crying and running. And I was screaming, "Yes, Father, yes! Yes, I'll come to you!" In my mind, I wasn't crossing the border. In my mind, I was

coming to my Father. In my mind, I wasn't breaking the law. In my mind, I was embracing my Father. I was running, and I just wanted to just run towards Him, give Him a hug, and sit in His lap. That's what I wanted. I could hear the people behind me going like, "The Stinky has gone mad! The Stinky has gone mad! Look at him. He thinks he can climb the wall. Look at him!"

And those walls, they don't make it easy, for a reason, of course. There is areas where one welding overlaps the other one, and you might be able to put your pinky on it. You might. If you're a rock climber — if somebody's a rock climber, to them should be okay. Not easy, but okay, they can probably climb it. Regular people — like, I don't know about you, but me — it wasn't possible. So I started running. I didn't stop. I took off running towards the wall. I jumped, and then I keep crawling, putting my fingers where I could and pushing myself up with them.

And then when all these people saw what was going on, they changed their tune. Instead of screaming, "The Stinky has gone crazy," to "¡Sube, Pelayo, sube! ¡Sube, Pelayo, sube!" There was an old TV show in Mexico a long time ago, probably in the '70s or '60s. The host of this show, his name was Pelayo. And he used to have a pole that on the top, he used to put a bag with money, right? They used to put — I don't know if it was Vaseline — around it, to make it slippery. When one of the contestants tried to go up, they screamed the same thing: "¡Sube, Pelayo, sube!" Which means, go up, Pelayo, go up — Pelayo is the name of the host. But he wasn't going up, but that's what they were chanting. And they were screaming that: "¡Sube, Pelayo, sube!" They were chanting for me, in support.

And then when they saw that I was climbing up, I guess they got inspired. They all ran towards the wall and tried to climb it too. Meanwhile, I could hear the INS officers on their cars amassing right on that area on the other side. They could hear us. They're right there.

When I got to the top, that's when I knew what the jacket was for. I grabbed myself with the right from one of the spears-like pointed things. And then with my left, I took the jacket and threw it on top — right on top of it. And I pulled myself right on top of it. And that's how I jumped the first fence. At the other side, you could hear the people screaming, because they were falling down into the canal, trying to climb the fence. It was impossible.

Now, when I got to the other side, there were already officers waiting for me. There's like an area big enough for two cars to drive by at the same time. There's a second fence. The second fence, it's kind of like the first one, but this one doesn't have the barbed wire on top. So I remember running through the officers and took off and jumped and climbed into the second wall and landed on the other side. They were in awe. I remember one of the officers screaming at the other ones, "What is it?" They were like — obviously they knew it was a human, but they go like, "What was that? What is that?" They were trying to reach for me. They were trying to grab me. I mean, I felt so strong. I felt so — you know what, I thank God, I never used drugs in my life, but if it was — the word "high" — at that moment, I was so high on the power of the Holy Spirit. In the book of Psalms, it says, "With my God, I will jump the walls." Now I know exactly what it means.

When I landed at the other side, I hurt my ankle. And then right there at that point, you could hear cars scrambling — you know, INS officers scrambling everywhere. There were ATVs. I could hear them, and horses — I mean, bikes everywhere, trying to catch this, whatever it was. I could hear the radio, and the radio going like, "He jumped the second fence! He jumped the second fence!" And on the other side, screaming, "Get ready, get ready!"

When I landed on the other side, when I hurt my feet, at that point, there were three cars. I remember there was a Chevy Blazer. There was a Ford Bronco in front of me, closer to me. And there was a Crown Vic to my right. Since the Bronco was closer to me, I started limping towards them. I didn't try to run. I just walked towards them. And I was still crying. With the paper still on my right hand — I never put it away. I always had it on my hand. How, I have no idea. I didn't thought about putting it on my pocket. I didn't do that. I just had it with my right hand at all times.

As I start getting closer to these first two officers — there were two. One of them was younger than the other. The younger one, he pulled the rear gate on the back, and he lifted the glass, and then he pulled the gate for me to get in. So I limped towards him. I remember — I was crying. And then when he heard me crying, he says, "Don't worry, don't worry. We're going to give you medical attention." He said that. He thought I was crying because I was hurt. And in my mind, I was like, what a difference. You know, over there on the Mexican side, they try to kill me. And over here, this guy doesn't even know me — you know, sees me hurt, and he's trying to help me.

So I was trying to get into the Bronco. He tried to help me, and he noticed that I was really wet. You know, I was covered in poop. He got a whiff of it. He's like, "Oh my—" and took a step back. So he went back inside and he put on gloves. The other officer, the older officer, put on gloves also. So I put my hands forward and he handcuffed me. And then I kind of roll towards the back and kind of sit down. They have little plastic seats in there. On the back, they have a light — a little light that they control, of course, to see through the rearview mirror what's going on in the back too. But they left it on.

As we were driving, I started reading the note. And I started crying again. Because in my mind, it was a note written by the hand of God, for me, at that very moment. The younger one kept saying, "Don't worry about it. We're going to give you medical attention soon, and you'll have no more pain." And I couldn't even tell them, because I couldn't put myself together enough to put a few words together to tell them: it's not what you think. I'm not crying because of pain. I'm crying because I'm full of joy. At that moment, I knew what joy really was. It wasn't really happiness. No, no, no. It was something that can be — just come and go, some emotion. It wasn't. It was much stronger than that. Something I never experienced.

And when I started reading it, I kept crying, but more like silently. I could hear them talking. And the older officer said to the younger one, he says, "Hey, happy birthday." He says, "Oh, thanks, thanks." I keep reading it, and I keep crying more and more. Then all of a sudden, the younger officer got curious, I guess. So he asked me, "What is it that you're crying for? What are you crying about?" And then I said, "Look, look — God loves me so much. Look, look what He says. This is in the Bible, isn't it? But I don't know where it is. Look, isn't it in the Bible?" He kind of like stopped — you know, you could stop anywhere;

we're in the mountain. He stopped and looked at it. And then he started reading it. And at first, I remember very distinctively that when he took it, even though he had gloves, he kind of like pinched it with one of the corners, because he didn't want to — you know, it was — you know, I had pieces of poop too. And then he started reading. And when he started reading, he said, "You're right, it is beautiful." And then I said, "It is in the Bible, isn't it? It is in the Bible, right?" He says, "Yeah, it's in the Bible, but I don't know where it is." So he gave it back to me and kept driving. And I kept reading it and crying.

Then I remember that it was his birthday, and I just want to wish him a happy birthday. So I said, "Happy birthday, officer." And then he says, "Oh — thanks." Kind of like weirded out. Like, who's this guy? He's wishing me a happy birthday. Okay. I mean, he wasn't expecting it from me, I guess. And then I said, "If you don't mind me asking, how old are you?" He paused, and then he says, "That's a personal question." And then the other officer says, "Yeah, how old are you?" And then he was kind of like hesitant — not because of the other officer, but because of me; he didn't wanna give out information, I guess. He says, "Okay, I'm 43. Okay, I'm 43." And then I said to him, "Officer, what's your name?" And then he paused even longer. And he says, "Why should I give you my name?" And then the older officer — obviously the more experienced — he says, "It's already on your badge. He's actually entitled to your name." And he says, "Okay, my name is Isaiah."

Then I said, "Huh" — I don't know why I said that — I said, "Isaiah 43." All of a sudden, he turned around really quick and looked at me, and he said, "What did you just say?" I said, "Oh — I'm sorry, officer. I didn't meant to offend you." And then he said, "No, what did you just say?" I said, "Oh — I said, happy birthday." He said, "No, no, no — after that." I said, "Oh — what is your name?" He says, "After that." I said, "Oh — how old are you?" He says, "Give me the piece of paper. Give me the piece of paper." But this time he didn't care about grabbing it by the corner — he just grabbed it and started reading it. All of a sudden, he said, "I think this is Isaiah 43." And then he started crying. And then his friend started crying. And I started crying, and we were all crying. And we cried there for — gosh, I don't know for how long, but we cried for a while.

And after that, they composed themselves. And I said "composed" because you could see — I was fighting it myself, to try to put myself together. The younger one signals the older one with his fingers, saying, come, come, follow me. They went outside, away from the car — from the truck — and they started talking. The only thing I could hear was — because the older officer was the one with the louder voice — he was saying, "We cannot do that. We can't do that. We can't. We just can't."

Then, after discussing that for a while, they came back to the car. The younger officer came — when he came back, he unfolded the seat and he pulled these pair of pants, and then he got this sweater — it was a hoodie. And then he went through the back, he opened the back gate. And then he said, "Here," he says. "Take off those pants, put this on. Take off that shirt that you have and put this hoodie on." You know what — when I put those pants, it felt so good to have something dry. And when I put that hoodie, it felt so good and warm. I felt as if God Himself was hugging me. It was a great, great hoodie, and it said Arizona Wildcats on it. The pants were so big — the guy was a big dude. I remember that he was handing me a piece of string so I can keep my pants up. He says, "Here, tie them."

And then, after that, they drove off, back to the city. They drove down and they parked on a dark alley, but they didn't fill me in on anything. They just parked there, and when they parked there, I remember saying, "Officers, are you gonna kill me?" The younger one, Isaiah, he looked at me and says, "Don't be an idiot." He said, "Why would I do that?" Then he walked back, opened the gate again. He says, "Come, come, come, come." He told me that in a hurry — with the hurry sense. Kind of like hurry, hurry — come, come, come. Then he says, "Give me your hands." So I put my hands forward, and he unlocked my handcuffs. He helped me down. He — I remember — he hugged me and helped me down, carefully and tenderly put me down on the ground, because he didn't want me to jump, because of my feet, because of my ankle. And then he reached for his wallet. He had \$40, and he handed them to me. He looked at his partner and said, "Do you have any cash?" His partner looked at him and said — he says, "No, because it's your turn to buy, remember?" And then he says, "I guess we're fasting today." Then the other officer says, "Well, I have my credit card." He reaches over and he pulls out \$3 — all he had.

And when he gave it to me, I said, "Huh — how funny. Let me say: you're 43, you gave me \$43, and the Bible verse is Isaiah 43." He started crying. His friend started crying, and I started crying again. We cried, but this time we hugged. We cried and hugged — who knows for how long?

After he gave me \$43, he gave me directions to the local McDonald's. He said, "You're gonna walk three streets down, straight, and then on the third light, you're gonna make a left. And like one quarter of a mile, on your left, you're gonna see a McDonald's. And there's a payphone outside. Call your friends to come and pick you up." So I just did that. They let me go.

WAYNE: It's almost impossible to believe. If I didn't know Luis, I don't know if I would. When Luis rejoined his family in California, he found a Bible so he could read Isaiah 43 for himself. It contained the same words he had read from the handwritten note in Spanish that kept sticking to his hand that evening.

LUIS: Everybody thought I was nuts after I came here, to my house, because I was reading Isaiah 43 over and over and over. I ripped the page off of the Bible, and then I framed it. And then I put it in there so I could see it all the time. And my sister-in-law, she didn't wanna go into that room, because she thought it was a bad thing, what I did.

WAYNE: Believe it or not, the story doesn't end here. To finish it, however, we have to skip ahead ten years. Luis is now married, raising a young family in Southern California. It will still be four years before we meet. Some friends invited Luis to attend a Promise Keepers prayer meeting on a Monday evening at a large congregation in a nearby city. At first he was reluctant to go, because he was already required to attend his own fellowship four nights a week. Still, he was drawn to go, and he was so glad he did.

LUIS: When I got there, they already had a name tag for me — I hang it on my neck. When I went in, we had two leaders. I noticed that the leaders, they didn't have name tags. The room was already full. So I just sit there, towards the back. So I sit towards the back, and then the two leaders, they said, "Before we get started, why don't we start with the word of prayer?" And then they said, "Does anybody have any petitions? Does anybody? Raise your hand." So I raised my hand. And then they said, "Yes, brother, what would you like us to pray for?" And I said, "Oh — for immigration stuff." They looked at each other, and

they kinda like smiled at each other. And I didn't take it personal — I was just curious as to why they smiled at each other. And then I said, "Is there something wrong? Or is that something — you know, is there something bad, to ask for that?" And they go like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no." They made sure I didn't get offended, because they said it — "Please, brother, don't get offended. We'll explain later. At the end of the meeting, we'll talk," they said. So I said, okay. We went on with the meeting, which was great.

And everybody started leaving, and I started making my way towards the door, because I forgot about what they say about staying later and talking to them. And as I was leaving, one of them said, "Oh, brother — Brother Luis, right?" I said, "Yes." He says, "Would you please stay so we can talk?" And I remember what they said at the beginning. So I said, "Oh yeah, sure, sure." Everybody left. And then when they left, we sit down on the table, and they said, "Look, the reason we ask you to stay, and the reason we kind of laugh at each other, it's because we are INS officers." At that moment, I remember apologizing. I said, "I'm sorry." I said, "I'm so sorry about asking for that. I apologize." They reassured me that everything was okay. And then they said, "This is off record." And they said, "But if you want to talk to us, we're INS officers." And then they told me where they work. They said, "Look, if we can help — you want to, tell us."

We talked for a while, probably like 20 minutes or so. One of them, the younger one, he took off his hat — he was wearing a baseball hat. He took it off, and then he kind of like fixed his hair and put it back on. When I looked at him — when he took off his hat, I looked at him, and I was sitting on my chair, and I stood up. And the same feeling I had when we were back at the border — that's the same feeling I started to experience at that moment. It was that honey-like, thick substance that it was coming, covering me, and it was all over me. And I started feeling joy and peace. I remember looking at him, and then I said, "Isaiah, is that you?" He looked all over to see if he had a name tag, and he looked at his partner, and his partner stood up. And he says, "How did you know me?" Then I looked at him and I said, "I am Luis — the guy you let go at the border ten years ago." He looked at me, he hugged me. He cried, I cried, and his friend cried. We sit there for a while — I don't know for how long, but it was a long time. We didn't say a thing. We just hugged and cried. To them, I wasn't somebody cross illegally — I was just a brother in Christ, and to me as well. I didn't see him any different. I love them, and they love me, because we have the same Father.

Later, when he composed himself, he said — kind of like chuckling — he said, "We were always wondering about you. We knew that God had a purpose for you, but we didn't know what it was." And then he said, "I kept feeling bad, because we should have told you about Jesus." He said that — "We should have told you about Jesus. But here we are." He said, "We were always wondering." And he says, "And we had you in our prayers, and we were praying for you. We didn't know, but we knew that God had a purpose for you. We didn't know what it was — but here we are."

And at that moment, it's when I learned — they said, the reason we let you go, it's because we knew that it was God ordering us to let you go. And also, we knew that God had a purpose for you. At that very moment, I also knew all the whole situation, the circumstances that allowed it. He says, "We didn't call them. We didn't call and said, 'We have one in custody.' You came to us. Even though there were more

witnesses seeing you coming into the car, only the person who catches you, or whatever — he's the one that files the paperwork, not the others. And to them, a person is just a person." He says, "I could easily replace you with another." He says, the reason also we let you in, they clearly said, it's because "you came to us." That's why — I didn't know why, but I was walking towards them, because they were the closer one to me. But I didn't know that all of that was being orchestrated and arranged by God Himself, so I can come to them and not anybody else — because He wanted to show Himself to them, as well as He wanted to show Himself to me. Nobody came saying, "You have to repent. You have to accept Jesus. You have to give your heart to the Lord." No — God Himself came and showed Himself for who He was all along: my Father. I have a loving Father that loves me. So that's all that matters to me.

WAYNE: I still remember the first time he told me that story. I was dumbfounded. To a passionate Christian and anti-illegal-immigration Republican, it didn't fit well with my religious sensibilities, and it messed with me for weeks. We'll return to that struggle in future episodes. As it turns out, however, December 1994 was transformational in my own journey as well. One week before that 21-year-old crossed the border, I had been betrayed by my closest friend. And the result of that changed decisively the trajectory of my life, that will play into the story in future episodes. Let me fill you in here.

I was pastoring an interdenominational fellowship in Central California that I'd helped to plant 14 years earlier. A friend of mine joined me in the endeavor as my associate pastor. But a few years earlier, I had elevated him to my co-pastor. Others warned me not to do that, but we'd become close friends in the process, and I wanted him to flourish in his own passions rather than following my lead. I even reduced my salary to elevate his, so that we would make the same amount of money. I wanted people to know that the title was not ceremonial. We would share leadership of this congregation and focus on different sections of the city, rather than have different job assignments. For many years, it worked out famously, and our families became close as well.

But beginning in 1993, things started to change. I hear rumors that a small faction of our elders are trying to take the congregation in a different direction and having secret meetings that sought to marginalize my influence. At first, I didn't believe them. When the rumors persisted, I tried to run them down by talking to those involved. Let's say these people were less than forthcoming, as I was to discover later. Tensions grew; attempts to resolve them didn't last long. And finally, on Sunday morning, December 11, 1994, that group announced to the congregation that I had unexpectedly resigned my position and that Sara and I were leaving the fellowship. I was out of town at the time, speaking at another congregation, and I had not offered my resignation. When people questioned what was going on, they were warned not to ask questions, but that I had some character issues that couldn't be resolved. Many took that to mean I'd had an affair or had misappropriated funds. Neither was true.

When I came back from my trip, I was livid at what they had done, but glad that their duplicity was now in the open, where it could be confronted. This coup had been launched by four of our 18 elders, and I thought it could be easily remedied when I told people what was happening. I had been the founding pastor and had the institutional power, as well as the affection of the people, to win this fight. But a funny thing happened on my way to fix the problem. I had a voice in my head that offered me a different invitation: I

have more to teach you if you walk away than if you stay.

I knew instantly what that meant, and I wanted no part of it. I'm the third of four brothers who grew up on a farm. I was highly competitive, and I would never consider walking away from a fight — especially one that involved my income, my reputation, and 15 years of friendships with people I cared deeply about. But the thought wouldn't leave me alone. If it was from God, it wasn't a command, but an invitation. The implication was clear: stay and fight if you want, but I wanna show you something better than what you have here. I was intrigued, but also scared. How would I provide for my family? I can't just leave and make it look like what they said was true. When I shared it with my wife, she immediately thought those were God's words, and it was the route she wanted to go. I was going to follow God if it was in fact Him, but I also had many reasons why it couldn't be His leading. The torment in my soul over the next few days was devastating. Everyone wanted to know what I was going to do, and I didn't know.

When Saturday night rolled around, I was more intrigued by the invitation than I was afraid of its consequences. But I still wasn't sure. I at least had to go back to confront the lies and defend my reputation — or so I thought. But no matter how I tried to express myself — what would I say anyway, the next morning, if I went back? I'd been warned that I wouldn't be allowed to say anything in the service, but then, how could they stop me? However, when I practiced what I was going to say, it all sounded so self-centered, and I kept hearing that voice: I have more to teach you if you walk away than if you stay. If God was behind this, even going back to shake the dust off my feet and tell people what was true would limit the scope of what He wanted to show me. I finally concluded that I at least needed to go back to defend my wife, since the letter they had read falsely accused her of motives she didn't have. Yes, that's it. I can at least do that.

At that precise moment, there was a knock on my study door, and Sara poked her head in. "I don't know what you're thinking about doing tomorrow," she said, "but if you're at all thinking about going back to defend me, I don't want it. I don't need it. And I'm not going with you." She closed the door and left, and I sat there dumbfounded. How could she? Why right then? I got up and followed her into the kitchen to see what she was thinking. Here's what she said: "I'm pretty sure that the voice in your head is God speaking to us. And I want to follow that. If you need to go back tomorrow for any reason, I want you to know — I love you. I support you. I'm just not going with you." And that's when I knew. Our time with that group of people was over.

We were leaving the security of close friends, a paycheck, health insurance, and a reputation I'd built over 15 years. They didn't even pay me a dime in severance. Within days of the news getting out, I was offered pastoral positions at a variety of congregations, and people from communities across the U.S. wanted me to come and plant a church with them. I didn't even want to entertain those invitations. I had 15 years to build the kind of congregation I thought God wanted, and even that system was still susceptible to the selfish whims of humanity. I didn't have it in me to try again.

I'm so glad now that in 1994, I walked away from what I thought was so valuable in my life to learn a better way of embracing the God I'd hungered to know. While I had learned many helpful things in my

religious training, it had failed to teach me how to live in the growing confidence of my Father's affection. As I was starting my trajectory out of religious obligation, Luis was just beginning his trek inside of it. He would glean many of its benefits, of course, but he would also eventually trade the joy of discovering how much God loved him for the rigors of meeting the institutional expectations of a religion called Christianity. It happened so subtly that he wouldn't recognize it until after our lives crossed paths. And that was still 14 years into the future.

For now, without a green card, Luis needs to build a life in the shadows and make one more trip to Mexico to marry his childhood sweetheart, Maria, and bring her back to the United States. Next time, on My Friend Luis...

LUIS: I don't want my wife and my daughters to experience what I experienced in Mexico. At least the attack, it's not physical to the point that my life is in danger. So I could take that. Being humiliated, stuff like that — that I can take. My girls being shot at, I can't.

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