

A man in a light-colored polo shirt and dark pants is walking away from the camera down a dirt path. The path is flanked by trees, and the scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The man's shadow is cast long and dark on the path ahead of him.

My Prison *and Yours*

*What confinement
taught me about freedom*

JACQUES COQUEREL

Acknowledgments

This book was born in a place where you lose much... but where you also discover what truly matters.

I first want to thank God my creator, and my savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, who gave His life to save me and whose silent presence was more real than ever at the heart of the ordeal. Where I did not understand, He was at work. Where I grew weak, He sustained me.

I thank Claire, my wife, whose faithful love carried far more than words can express. Her quiet courage, her steadfastness, and her trust were a pillar in the storm.

Thank you to my children, my daughters-in-law, my granddaughters, and my family, for their affection, their patience, and their support despite the distance and the uncertainty.

I also think of those I met in detention. Some became brothers on the road for a time. Our conversations, our silences, our shared prayers marked this journey far more than I could ever say.

Thank you to those who, from the outside, helped, supported, prayed, and acted in the shadows without seeking to be seen. Your faithfulness was a light in a dark season.

Finally, thank you, reader. If these pages reach you in a trial, a desert, or a time of waiting, then this season will not have been in vain.

Introduction

There are prisons you can see. And there are many others you cannot.

When we speak of prison, we think of walls, bars, imposed schedules, a freedom taken away visibly and brutally. For a long time, I myself reduced the word to that single reality. Until the day I was confronted with it personally.

Looking back, I can state without hesitation: the most widespread prison is not the one that confines the body, but the one that confines the soul.

You can be legally free and inwardly captive. Captive to fear. Captive to performance. Captive to the image you must maintain. Captive to an undigested past or an anxiety-filled future.

The prison I went through was real, located, dated. It had a clear beginning. It had an end. But what I experienced there continues to produce its effects far beyond those walls. For it was paradoxically in that place of constraint that an inner space opened up.

Before this ordeal, my life matched what many would call success: a stable and fulfilling marriage, a thriving family life, intense professional activity, responsibilities, decisions, constant movement. I was busy, effective, useful. Rarely still. Thoughtful, fairly composed, but often turned toward the future. Perhaps not as present as I should have been, due to frequent travels outside of France. Respected by the staff of the company I led in Africa. Blessed with a church aligned with my personal convictions. I was a fulfilled man, with few worries. Perhaps that is exactly what God wanted to shake up.

Prison took many things from me. Above all, it gave me back what matters most.

It took away the noise to give me back silence. It took away control to teach me surrender. It took away the schedule to restore time to me. It took away the roles to confront me with the man.

I do not write this book to idealize suffering or to glorify the ordeal. I would not wish prison on anyone. But I now refuse to see this passage as a useless parenthesis or a sterile injustice. That

place was, for me, a school. A demanding, uncomfortable, but profoundly transformative school.

Over time, in the imposed silence, I observed, listened, wrote. Not to prepare a book at first, but to stay alive inwardly. And in hindsight, ten lessons emerged. Ten profound shifts. Ten truths that go far beyond the walls of a prison.

They are neither theoretical, nor quick, nor comfortable. They come from what is real.

They speak of life, of faith, of identity, of inner freedom.

This book is for those going through a visible ordeal. But also — and perhaps above all — for those living in an invisible prison. For those who succeed but burn out. For those who move forward without knowing why anymore. For those who give much but have lost themselves.

The ten lessons you are about to read are neither a method nor a program. They are a path. Some will resonate immediately. Others will take time. That is normal. You never leave a prison — visible or invisible — in a single step.

Today, looking back, I know one thing: you never come out unscathed from a place where you have been stripped bare.

But you can come out more true. More free. More aligned.

If these pages help you identify your own prison, and perhaps find your way out of it inwardly, then this book will have fulfilled its purpose.

PART I — THE FALL

Chapter 0 — The Day Everything Changed

It was July 4, 2024. I remember it with an almost surreal precision, as if that date had been etched before I even lived it. American Independence Day. A symbol of freedom. I was far from imagining that, for me, it would mark the beginning of a loss of liberty.

I was at Félix Houphouët-Boigny Airport, in Port-Bouët, Abidjan. I was taking flight AF 707 to Bordeaux, with a stopover in Roissy. Departure was scheduled for 11:30 PM. A familiar route. Almost routine. For years, I had made this round trip several times a year. The same gestures, the same landmarks. Nothing foreshadowed a rupture.

Normally, I check in my luggage. I spend some time in the lounge, check a few messages, read, mentally organize the week ahead in France. I make a few calls, eat, board. Then six and a half hours of flight, then Bordeaux before noon. A simple schedule, almost mechanical.

But this time, my life was simply about to be turned upside down.

As I head toward the exit control, I feel slightly relieved because I had feared something that I managed to avoid... but not entirely. I place my four fingers on the biometric scanner. The gesture is automatic. The machine reads my fingerprints. The woman behind the counter looks at her screen. Her face doesn't really change, but something slows down, like a hint of concern.

She takes her time reading the screen.



I ask myself a few questions. It happens sometimes. An additional check, an administrative detail. I stand there, slightly back, carry-on in hand. Other passengers continue moving forward. Flight announcements follow one another over the loudspeaker. Airport life continues at its normal pace.

She calmly reads her screen and asks me quietly whether I had a summons from the PJ (Judicial Police) today. I confirm. She asks me to go downstairs to see the police, answer a few questions, and then come back.

Ten days earlier.

My partner at the company I was running had indeed called me, while I was in France, to come to Abidjan for our annual board meeting. One question had already struck me because he asked: I need your arrival and departure dates. I thought to myself, why would he want my departure date? I was far from suspecting I was walking into an ambush.

At that fateful board meeting, I was presented with an audit (of which I had no knowledge) indicating embezzlement that would require me to surrender my company shares for free. I found the approach very mafia-like. I refused to surrender my shares, asking for time to read the audit in question. Then strangely, my partner told me he would walk me downstairs. When

I refused, he insisted. I complied. We took the elevator, and two plainclothes Judicial Police officers approached me and handed me a summons for the very day I was leaving. I finally understood why my partner had asked for my departure date.

I hold the piece of paper in my hand and a question crosses my mind: is this really a genuine summons or a means of coercion? I then decided to send my lawyer to this summons.

I learned much later that if I had shown up at this summons, orders had been given to have me remanded in custody. On what grounds? What basis? On mere suspicion with the collaboration of a prosecutor.

In Côte d'Ivoire, a complaint, even a false one, provided it is serious enough, is sufficient to trigger a custody order. I was light-years away from knowing that such a thing could happen. My only encounters with the police until that day had involved speeding tickets. For the first time, a simple complaint filed against me, in a commercial matter, was going to land me in detention. But let us not get ahead of ourselves.

I return to the airport incident.

The woman kindly tells me I need to go down to the police to make a statement.

The police inform me that it is too late and that I will be questioned the next morning.

Then two PJ officers, dressed in civilian clothes, arrive. The same ones who had given me the summons. Their tone is correct, almost neutral. They tell me I must accompany them to the Judicial Police to respond to a charge. The word *accompany* sounds like a demand. They collect my luggage and I follow them calmly as if we had traveled together. Nothing spectacular. No handcuffs. In fact, surprisingly, I was never handcuffed, as if the Lord simply wanted to lead me to His school.

In the car taking me to the PJ headquarters, the city scrolls past the window. Abidjan at night. The lights, the headlights, the familiar silhouettes. Everything seems normal. Except me. I ask myself questions.

I still think everything will be cleared up. That I will answer a few questions, clear up a misunderstanding, leave. My mind searches for a logical outcome. It cannot grasp that something deeper is taking place.

I know I have missed the plane. It is late. I did not want to wake Claire, my wife.

The night wears on. I am offered to sleep in an air-conditioned office on a small mattress in exchange for a contribution. I accept and pay. I pray. I fall asleep, exhausted.

I am no longer a delayed traveler. I have become a detained man.

I wake in the middle of the night. I think of my family. Of those waiting for me without knowing I am being held. Of the routine that has just been broken without a sound.

There are no grand feelings yet. No clear anger. No outright fear. But a nagging question: what is happening to me? What is happening to us — because I keep thinking of Claire, knowing she will wait for me at home, my car parked at the airport.

In the early morning, when the fatigue has slightly lifted, I get up. I am offered a coffee, which I gladly accept. Then I am taken to another office to respond to the charges.

My former life has just come to a halt, like the fall of a blade.

Chapter 1 — Remanded in Custody (MD)

Four days later, I am brought before an investigating judge.

The scene is almost surreal. A plain room. Files. The investigating judge sits behind his desk. The clerk to his left. Me, facing them. My lawyer to my right. So there we are, four people in a completely ordinary office. I ask myself questions. I was somewhat relaxed but slightly tense because my lawyer had told me, just before entering the judge's office, that everything had been arranged. You'll be going home tonight.

The judge is on the phone, facing me. Then he puts down his phone, opens my file. I listen carefully, but I have the impression that the words take time to reach my mind.

The judge reads a list of charges.

Embezzlement. Financing of terrorism. Others still.

The words fall one by one, heavy, disconnected from the reality I know. They do not match my life, not my intentions, not my track record. And yet, there they are, written on paper, spoken calmly.

Then comes the inevitable question:

— Do you acknowledge these charges?

I respond immediately:

— No.

My voice is firm, but inside everything wavers.

The judge then pronounces two letters:

— MD.

I turn to my lawyer. I ask what that means. He replies simply:

— Mise en Dépôt. You are going to be detained at the MACA, the Maison d'Arrêt et de Correction d'Abidjan — Abidjan's remand and correctional facility.

At that precise moment, reality closes in.

I am struck as if by a sledgehammer.

Then the judge adds, you'll see, the MACA isn't as bad as all that.

Work things out with your plaintiff, bring me an agreement, and I'll have you released next week.

I suddenly understand how Joseph could have been thrown into a dungeon on the sole word of an accusation. How Daniel could have found himself in a lion's den because of political rivalries. Life sometimes hangs by a thread. Today, everything is fine. Tomorrow, you disappear. Forgotten by many, mourned by a few.

The feelings collide: rage, incomprehension, regret, shock. Nothing is clear. Everything is violent, but on the inside. On the outside, the scene remains calm, almost mundane. When I heard the charges, I immediately knew that God had allowed this to happen.

In the midst of this inner turmoil, a thought imposes itself, unexpected:

If God allows this isolation, it cannot be empty.

I think of Claire, my wife. Of my three sons. Of my daughters-in-law. Of my granddaughter. I am not Ivorian. I have no family here. I came to Côte d'Ivoire for work, several times a year, for short stays. And here I am, suddenly projected into another face of Africa. But also confronted with a more universal reality: the justice of men and the justice of God do not always follow the same paths.

During the ride, a thought keeps turning in my mind: all the charges are false. So God wants to show me something. But what? Why now? Why me?

I think of Job.

Certain films I had seen come back to mind: The Count of Monte Cristo, Midnight Express.

I tell myself, this is how lives are overturned. You are high one day, then you are low.

An hour later, I pass through the gates of the MACA.

The Maison d'Arrêt et de Correction d'Abidjan bears no resemblance to the image I had of a Western prison. It is not a cold, silent building. It is a kind of African village enclosed within four walls, under permanent surveillance. A population of more than ten thousand inmates. An informal organization. A life that has reconstituted itself inside.

I discover a world with its codes, its hierarchies, its unwritten laws.



I begin to learn my way around: Those who play games and those who loiter. Those who spend their time chatting or drinking coffee.

I am stunned by the absence of worry in most eyes. You hear wordplay and certain phrases circulate, like prison proverbs:

MD: Manger Dormir (Eat Sleep). Here, that's all we do. We eat, we sleep.

Good position: a guard is coming.

“It’s man who put you here, but it’s God who will get you out.”

“It’s not what you did that brought you here. It’s maybe what you had done... or what you hadn’t done.”

“If you don’t pray, you’ll never get out of here.”

These phrases strike me. They are raw, sometimes excessive, but they speak a truth I understand well.

I have just entered another world. A world that would end up being mine for seventeen long months. I innocently thought it would last two weeks at most.



My Ghanaian partner refused to negotiate anything. He quietly returned to Ghana.

Chapter 2 — Entering the MACA

The arrival at the MACA does not happen in turmoil, but in a succession of precise, almost administrative gestures.

We are made to get out. We are lined up. Our names are recorded in a large register, as if to officially seal our entry into another world. The search is quick, methodical. Then we are dispatched to different buildings.

I do not yet know where I am going. I am tired, drained by the days spent at the Judicial Police. My mind operates in slow motion. My body follows without resistance. I remember crossing a large courtyard. The next day I saw it was a football field.

I am directed to a particular building: the **MACHA** — the Maison d'Arrêt et de Correction des Hommes d'Affaires (Remand Facility for Businessmen). I do not immediately understand what that means. I simply walk forward.

I am led into a cell called **the leaders' cell**.

Inside, about twenty men. Unexpected profiles. Politicians. Company directors. Imams. Pastors. Public officials. Foreigners like me. Nothing like the image I had of a prison.

I expected harshness. I discover... smiles.

I am introduced to the cell. Everyone looks at me, evaluates me briefly, then the welcome is surprisingly simple. Someone gives a welcome speech and adds, here we don't say welcome — we say Yako. Yako is the Ivorian expression for sympathizing with your misfortune. I am handed a bottle of Coca-Cola as a welcome gesture. The act surprises me. I do not know how to react. Nearly everyone looks relaxed, some looked joyful or perhaps relieved.

It is the exact opposite of what I had imagined.

I am asked to say a word. I explain that I had often prayed for a mastermind of businessmen in Côte d'Ivoire, but I had forgotten to specify the location. That made everyone laugh.

A few minutes later, a young man approaches me. He speaks calmly, with a form of natural respect.

— My name is Jean. I'm the one who serves everyone here. What do you have in the morning?

The question throws me off. I respond almost automatically:

— A coffee will do.

— What time do you want it?

I stop for a moment. I don't even know what time you get up in prison.

— What time are we supposed to get up here?

He bursts out laughing, without mockery.

— Here, you do what you want. You sleep when you want. You get up when you want.



I then feel an unexpected relief. After four days at the PJ, this place seems almost comfortable. There, at the PJ, every gesture was constrained. Even the shower was an ordeal: rats sometimes ran between your legs while you tried to wash. Here, for the first time since my arrest, I can breathe a little.

It almost feels like I am at a biblical camp for adults.

It is very late. The air is light because we have air conditioning. One of the few cells to have it. The atmosphere is surprisingly calm. Conversations are hushed. Some pray. Others talk quietly. No one raises their voice. Everything seems respectful. Those who want to smoke step outside.

I lie down. And against all expectations, I sleep a deep, almost restorative sleep. As if my body, after days of tension, had finally found a foothold, even in this improbable place.

When I wake up, I realize I am indeed in prison. The walls are there. But almost everyone is still asleep. I hear some people snoring heavily.

Jean is asleep. I brush my teeth and go out. I ask where one can get breakfast. I am shown several spots where I can get coffee for 100 FCFA (15 cents). It is good strong coffee, the same I buy outside for 2 euros.



Something has changed: the raw fear of the first days has given way to a new lucidity. I go get my Bible. I come back for a second coffee. I do my reading and I feel a profound gratitude, as if I were not in prison at all.

Then I whisper: speak Lord, for your servant is listening.

I had just entered a universe whose rules I still did not know.

But I already understand one thing: prison is nothing like what I had imagined.

Chapter 3 — The First Rules of the New World

The MACA has walls, doors, locks. But its real structure is invisible.

In the first days, you think you are locked in a place. In reality, you enter a system. A parallel world with its laws, its balances, its silent hierarchies. Nothing is written, but everything is understood.

The prison is managed by the prisoners themselves. That is the “Correction” part of the MACA. It is about making the young ones responsible. The facility’s administration accepts this.

There are several buildings. Each building has a CB, a Chef de Bâtiment (Building Chief). Each cell has a CC, a Chef de Chambre (Cell Chief), with his deputy, the Commissioner.

Then there are departments managed by inmates and supervised by the CB.

Each department is identified by a chosen color.

Cleanliness department.

Security department.

Search department.

Reception department.

Then there are the guards who are there to maintain order.

But as a general rule, there is total freedom.

You can do sports. Have a personal trainer. Get a massage whenever you want. Of course, everything has a cost.

It’s a bit like the village of Asterix blended with an African village. All that was missing was the druid Panoramix and the magic potion.

At the MACHA, and in the leaders' cell, the profiles are different from what I had imagined. Company directors. Political leaders. Imams. Pastors. Foreigners. Men accustomed to leading who must relearn their place.

I do not complain. I wait to be summoned for my deposition before the investigating judge. That would not happen until four months after my arrival at the MACA. Yes, August and September are judicial holiday months. Nothing happens.

During those holiday months, many Bible studies are organized.

It was in this context that Marcel approached me one day, after seeing me read the Bible. He invited me to "the grotto," a meeting place for Christians. There, the walls seemed a little less thick. People spoke of hope, of falling, of rising again. Marcel told me one day:

— You know it was God who sent you here.

I replied:

— No. It was my plaintiff.

He smiled:

— He just used your plaintiff. Ask yourself instead why God sent you here.

I was not ready to accept that idea, even though I had known it from the first day. Knowing and accepting are two different things.

The invisible rules of prison do not only concern physical survival. They touch the inner self. They force you to slow down, to observe, to reflect. To discover that you no longer control much, except the way you inhabit what happens to you.

I gradually understood that prison is not crossed by force, but by discernment. Not in permanent revolt, but in inner vigilance.

Why does God want to isolate us?

Joseph spent years in prison, probably a decade since we do not know how long he spent in Potiphar's house.

The prophet Elijah was set apart for three and a half years before his confrontation with the 450 prophets of Baal. He spent time near the brook Cherith, east of the Jordan. Then he was sent to the widow of Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, far from Samaria, the capital of the kingdom of Israel where Ahab and his wife Jezebel reigned. Yet Obadiah had hidden 500 prophets. Elijah could have been sent to those prophets for encouragement and to receive encouragement. I am not even mentioning the seven thousand prophets faithful to God who were hidden. But no, God saw fit to send him far away to a poor widow who was preparing her last meal.

Many great men have been set apart. The most famous of them is of course Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison.

I was often lost in these reflections, but each time a voice told me: be useful where you are.

I choose to believe that I am in training. From that moment, I have no reason to feel sorry for myself.

PART II — THE DESERT

Chapter 4 — Time, Differently

The first thing prison changes is not just space. It is the way time is experienced.

From the outside, you imagine endless days, heavy hours, unbearable slowness. But at the MACA, reality is more surprising: time often seems to pass quickly.

Not because it is free. But because it is filled differently.

The day starts late in several cells. In ours, it starts very late. The room lights are turned on around noon. Some get up earlier, especially those who like to go outside to breathe some air or walk before the heat. But many sleep late because they go to bed very late.

Then comes the meal. Then each person enters their own rhythm. There is no official schedule, but there is constant activity.

Some talk for hours. Others sit in front of the television. Matches, series, news become markers in the day.

And then there is football. It is the main activity.



Two fields. Matches every day. At any hour. Teams form, challenge each other, reunite. Sport gives a rhythm, excitement, a reason to leave the cell. There are clubs, jerseys, tournaments, cups. At times, you could almost forget where you are.

Spiritual life is also present. The grotto for Catholics. The evangelical church for evangelicals. The mosque for Muslims. Other places of prayer exist outdoors. Jehovah's Witnesses have theirs under a tree.



Services, Bible studies, moments of reflection occupy the mind as much as the body. Some seek faith there. Others consolation. Still others simply a space of silence.

The day passes like this, without you really noticing.

In the evening, life does not stop. Many watch television late into the night in their cells. Others use their phones — tolerated but not authorized. But everyone, or nearly everyone, has a phone. People talk, exchange, follow the news from outside. Prison never fully sleeps.

And yet.

Despite this activity, despite these occupations, another reality remains: time has lost its direction.

Days pass quickly. Weeks pass slowly. Months become blurred because everyone waits for their turn at the court. As the guards like to point out: you are detainees, not prisoners, until you are judged. They like to encourage us.

You can fill the hours, but you cannot speed up the waiting. That is where the inner desert begins.

The desert is not the absence of activity. It is the absence of control.

You can play football, talk, pray, watch television... but you do not know when the situation will change. You live in an active present, suspended from an uncertain future.

It is in this paradox that I began to understand something else.

I could not control the length of my stay. But I could choose how to inhabit my days. Endure each hour or give it meaning. Keep busy to forget, or settle down to listen.

In the Bible, the desert is not always silent. It can be filled with walking, tents, conversations. But it remains a place where God works on a man over time.

Prison filled my days. The desert worked on my heart.

What am I becoming in this time that has been imposed on me?

The desert is not empty. It is where Moses approached the burning bush — not in the noise of Egypt.

But the desert is empty, and slow.

And in that slowness, something begins to transform without a sound.

What did Moses do for 40 years? Elijah for three and a half years? Paul in Arabia, for years?

Mandela for 27 years.

Chapter 5 — Invisible Prisons

In prison, you have time to think.

One day, this idea hit me with an almost unsettling clarity: I am physically confined, but many men outside live in far deeper prisons.

Prisons without walls. Prisons without bars. But prisons nonetheless.

I cannot help thinking of those who are physically free yet chain themselves:

Drugs. Alcohol. Pornography. Debt. A disastrous marriage one dare not confront. Constant anxiety about tomorrow. Bitterness and hatred. Envy. The desire for revenge. Jealousy. Greed. A job you hate.

And more.

So, who is truly in prison?

Many large cities, especially in the United States, show us homeless people and addicts who spend most of their time in a tent or on the ground, under the scorching sun or in freezing cold. For some, it was a setback that led them there. For others, it is almost a choice, an escape turned lifestyle.

These men are outside. And yet, they seem locked in an invisible dead end.

Prison then becomes for me a relative concept.

Here, I am deprived of physical freedom, but I still have a bed, a meal, familiar faces around me, conversations, a framework.

They sleep outside, left to themselves, sometimes without hope, sometimes without anyone to call them by name.

I do not minimize prison. I simply discover that confinement takes many forms.

And behind all these forms, there is one word that makes the difference:

Hope.

Hope that the situation will change. Hope of seeing your family again. Hope of returning to a familiar circle. Hope of being able to repair. Hope of starting over.

It is hope that keeps us alive here.

Without hope, prison becomes an abyss. With hope, it becomes a crossing.

I began to understand that the real prison is not only the one that confines the body. It is the one that suffocates hope.

A man can be outside, free in his movements, and no longer expect anything from life. Another can be behind walls and continue to believe that a future is possible.

Freedom perhaps begins there: in the ability to keep hope alive, even when everything seems closed.

This reflection reminded me of the story of a free man who voluntarily chose a form of confinement.

In 1845, Henry David Thoreau left American society, which he considered too noisy, too materialistic, too distracted. He settled alone in a cabin near Walden Pond. He would live there for two years, two months, two days, voluntarily isolated, to learn to live with the essential and observe life without the tumult.

He was not in prison. He had withdrawn.

But his approach raises a troubling question: why does a free man feel the need to isolate himself in order to find himself?

Thoreau wanted to strip away the superfluous to see what remained. He wanted to hear his own thoughts, find a natural rhythm, escape social pressure. He wrote that he did not want to discover, at the moment of death, that he had not truly lived.



Leo Tolstoy also took a similar approach in many respects.

Tolstoy: The Crisis That Leads to Simplicity

After the immense success of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy went through a profound spiritual crisis. He questioned wealth, prestige, social life. Like Thoreau, when faced with forced stripping away, he discovered that outward abundance does not heal inner emptiness.

He turned to a simpler life at **Yasnaya Polyana** (his estate), adopted peasant clothes, worked the land, renounced certain privileges. He then wrote *A Confession* (where he recounted his search for meaning) and *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, which proposed a lived, nonviolent faith, centered on concrete love of one's neighbor.

As Tolstoy understood after his own inner crisis, the meaning of life is not found in outward success, but in a life given. Prison led me to that same discovery: the value of an existence is measured by the love it leaves behind.

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” — Leo Tolstoy.



I did not choose my isolation. It was imposed on me.

But the inner result was beginning to resemble what he described: less noise, less rushing, more confrontation with oneself. Prison stripped me of outward freedom; it offered me, despite myself, the opportunity for a deeper inner freedom.

Some men flee solitude all their lives. Others seek it in order to find themselves.

Prison forced me to stop. Thoreau stopped voluntarily.

Two different paths. The same encounter: oneself.

Chapter 6 — Life at the MACA

Four months after my arrival at the MACA, I am finally summoned for my deposition before the investigating judge. The same one who had sent me to the MACA. Until then, I had only responded to the charges at the Judicial Police on July 5, 2024. We are now in October 2024.

The judge listens to me attentively. The clerk takes careful notes. The session lasted more than two hours.

Then he tells me something important: you did nothing of what you are accused of at the criminal level. But you did create another company while serving as manager, while you were already managing another company. That can be interpreted as a form of unfair competition.

The nature of the charges had shifted. Now they were no longer the original accusations.

It was no longer terrorism financing or embezzlement. In reality, I had appointed a manager to run my company, but when creating it I had registered myself as manager. Under Ivorian law, that is a serious offense.

The case would need to go to a correctional court. Once again, the summons does not come.

While waiting, my lawyer requests provisional release. It is granted.

The justice of men follows its course, with its delays, its twists, its gray areas.

I had no intention of writing an account to detail the legal aspects. What matters to me here is to leave a memory. A small path traveled.

Something that can happen to anyone.

In total, I spent seventeen months in detention.

Seventeen months outside my former life. Seventeen months in a space I had not chosen.

Seventeen months that shifted something deep within.

Seventeen months where I prayed with Claire every evening.

Seventeen months of friendship with hundreds of people.

Seventeen months of the mastermind I had always wanted.

Looking back, I see that isolation did what the bustle of my life would not allow. It stopped me. It placed me face to face with myself. It forced me to slow down, to listen, to revisit my priorities, my faith, my relationship with time, with success, with dependence on circumstances.

In the Bible, times of isolation are never useless parentheses.

Joseph knew prison before the palace. Moses knew the desert before the mission. David knew flight before the throne. Paul wrote behind bars words that still echo across centuries.

None of them would have chosen those seasons. But that is where their vision changed.

I do not claim to compare myself to them. But I recognize the same principle at work: a time when the outside closes so the inside can open.

Isolation strips away the distractions. It reveals what truly holds when everything else falls away. It forces you to distinguish the essential from the accessory.

Little by little, my prayer changed. Less “Why me?” More “What do you want to do in me through this?”

I did not understand everything. I did not understand the delays. I did not understand the detours. But I was beginning to see that this desert could become an invisible workshop.

A place of stripping. A place of realignment. A place of transformation.

Isolation is not always a punishment. It can become a setting apart.

And it is in this setting apart that the lessons began to emerge.

There is a question that always eventually imposes itself in the silence of confinement:

Why?

Why this brutal interruption of my life? Why this fall I did not see coming? Why this imposed isolation, far from my loved ones, far from my bearings?

At first, this question was a revolt. It sought someone to blame, an immediate logic, a quick way out. But the desert does its work slowly. It wears down resistance, it wearies anger, it broadens perspectives.

He is the potter, I am the clay. How can the clay question what the master does?

 PART III — THE 10 LESSONS — THE TRANSFORMATION

Chapter 7 (Lesson 1) — Naked Identity

Before prison, I had never really asked myself who I was... without what I did.

I was an active man. Responsible. Committed. My identity was tied to my roles, my decisions, my projects. People called on me to solve problems, to organize, to lead. My schedule was full, and that reassured me.

I had never realized how much my existence rested on action.

Then, from one day to the next, everything stopped.

No more role. No more responsibility. No one left to manage. Nothing more to produce.

I had plenty of things to do when I got home. My wife knew it, and she was waiting for me so we could do them together. Then I am not there. I thought I was important. But she managed to do everything, with help of course.

Then I thought I was less important. Let us be honest: if everything can be done without me, I am not that important after all. This reassures me and worries me at the same time.

At the MACA, no one knew me for what I had done. No one was waiting for me to make any decisions. I was no longer “Jacques the...” I was simply one detainee among others.

In the first days, this creates a strange void. A loss of bearings. A feeling of uselessness. What purpose do you serve when you no longer serve any purpose? Who are you when no one needs your skills?

Prison strips away titles like removing a jacket. And underneath, you must discover the man.

Psychologist Carl Jung spoke of the *persona* — the social mask we wear to function in the world. Prison tears that mask off brutally. It does not ask who you were. It sends you back to what remains when there is no more stage.

At first, I struggled inwardly against this feeling of erasure. I wanted to remain someone important, even here. I wanted to keep some form of control, some visible usefulness. But prison does not reward restlessness. It exposes the futility of roles when circumstances change.

Then another question emerged, more unsettling:

Can I exist without doing?

Without producing. Without leading. Without solving. Without being expected.

Just... existing.

Days at the MACHA taught me this slowly. Sitting, sometimes, with no specific task. Reading. Praying. Listening to others. Watching the light move across the walls. Nothing spectacular. Nothing profitable. Nothing to build a reputation on.

And yet, I felt that something deeper was being built.

I was discovering that my worth did not depend on my immediate usefulness. That I was not merely the sum of my functions. That I could be present to God, present to others, present to myself... without accomplishing anything visible.

In the outside world, we often confuse activity with existence. We fill our lives to avoid feeling the void. We run to avoid stopping. We produce to justify our place.

The Bible is surprisingly clear on this point, even though we have sometimes learned to read it otherwise. In the episode of Martha and Mary, Jesus does not reproach Martha for her service, but for her restlessness. Mary does nothing productive. She is simply there. Present. Attentive. And it is this posture that Jesus calls *the better part*.

Prison did not teach me to be useless. It taught me that **my worth does not depend on my immediate usefulness**.

In Scripture, God never begins by exploiting a man; He begins by forming him inwardly. Moses is not called in the palace, but in the desert. Joseph is not elevated directly to power, but refined through injustice and waiting. Jesus Himself begins His ministry with forty days of withdrawal and silence.

Prison removed that escape route from me.

It forced me to remain face to face with myself, without performance, without a role to play.
And in that face-to-face, a simple truth began to settle:

I am not what I do. I am someone, even when I do nothing.

It is a difficult lesson for a man accustomed to action. But it is a new freedom.

Existing without doing is not becoming passive. It is discovering that being precedes doing.
That identity is not born from performance, but from relationship — with God, with others,
with oneself.

Prison stripped me of my functions. It gave me back my naked humanity.

And perhaps that is where the transformation truly began.

First lesson laid down: A man's worth does not depend on his activity.

And you?

- Who would you be if, tomorrow, everything stopped?
- What would your identity rest on if you could no longer produce, decide, or perform?
- Take a moment of voluntary silence. No screen. No objective. Just to be present.

“Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)

Chapter 8 (Lesson 2) — The God of Silence

Before prison, I thought I knew how to pray.

I prayed while traveling, between meetings, in the morning before starting the day, before eating, in the evening when fatigue settled. My prayers were sincere, but often rushed and repetitive. They accompanied an already full life. God was present... but in the noise.

At the MACA, the nature of the noise changed.

There was always sound: voices, laughter, football matches, conversations, televisions on late into the night. But behind this constant commotion, another silence settled in. An inner silence, impossible to avoid.

There was no longer a schedule to fill. No more urgent decisions. No more daily responsibilities. Days could be active, but they no longer had the same pressure. And when night fell, when conversations gradually faded, I found myself face to face with myself.

And face to face with God.

At first, my prayers resembled pleas. I asked, explained, justified. I wanted to understand, to obtain, to accelerate. I talked a lot.

Then, slowly, the words diminished.

I realized I had little left to add. The questions went in circles. The explanations changed nothing. So I simply stayed there... in silence.

It was uncomfortable.

Silence reveals what you avoid hearing. It brings up fears, regrets, wounds that had been covered over by activity. But it is also in this silence that I began to perceive something else: a presence that did not depend on my performance or my answers.

I often thought of the prophet Elijah, hidden in a cave, exhausted, discouraged. God does not speak to him in the violent wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire. He reveals Himself in “a still small voice.”

In prison, I did not hear audible voices. But I learned to recognize that inner whisper: a peace that returned for no outward reason, a conviction that settled quietly, a new light on certain things in my life.

Silence was no longer a void to flee. It became a space of encounter.

I began to read the Bible differently. More slowly. Less to search for immediate answers, more to let the words sink deep. Sometimes a single verse accompanied me through an entire day. Not as a solution, but as a presence.

In the outside world, we fear silence. We fill every space with screens, music, notifications. Silence confronts us with ourselves. It reminds us that we do not control everything.

Prison took many things from me. It offered me silence.

And in that silence, I discovered that God does not speak only when things are going well, nor only when everything collapses. He speaks over time, in quiet faithfulness, in the presence that remains when everything else disappears.

I cannot say I understood everything. But I learned to listen differently. Less rushed, less demanding, more available.

Hearing God in silence is not receiving detailed explanations. It is learning to trust when the answers do not come right away.

Prison closed many doors. Silence opened one inside.

In that forced silence, my way of praying was also shaken.

I knew many people were praying for me. Friends, family, entire churches. Some were fasting. Some were interceding fervently. And yet, things did not change at the pace I had hoped.

Then a difficult question imposed itself:

Why doesn't God answer all these prayers?

Over time, I understood that prayer is not a single reality. It has different depths.

To simplify, I would say there are at least three levels.

The first level is that of the request. You pray as you file a petition. It is sincere, but often routine. You hope God will do something, but deep down, you continue living as if everything still depended on you.

The second level is prayer mixed with faith.

A well-known story illustrates this. In a village struck by a long drought, church leaders organized a prayer meeting to ask for rain. Many people came to pray. But only one arrived with an umbrella: a little girl. The others came to a prayer meeting. She came expecting rain.

Faith does not only change the words of prayer. It changes the inner attitude.



And then there is a third level: prayer united with faith... and with action.

The woman who had suffered from bleeding for twelve years did not merely believe that Jesus could heal her. She pushed her way through the crowd to touch the hem of His garment.



Abraham did not merely believe that God could act. He took Isaac with him and led him to the altar.

Prayer, at this level, engages the whole person. It does not only seek an external intervention; it accepts entering a path, sometimes incomprehensible, where obedience and trust advance together.

In prison, I realized that I often prayed at the first level, sometimes at the second... and rarely at the third.

I was asking to get out, free. God was working to transform me.

The answer to prayer was not only a change of circumstances. It was a change of man.

Second lesson: God often speaks where the noise stops.

And you?

- What place does silence have in your life?

- At what level of prayer do you usually pray?
- Voluntarily try a few minutes of silence each day. No requests. Just to listen.

“After the fire, a still small voice.” (1 Kings 19:12)

Chapter 9 (Lesson 3) — The Slow Rhythm of Eternity

During the first six months, I asked myself many questions about the slowing down of things. In six months, I was brought before the investigating judge only once. In six months, I went to court only once. In six months, I left the MACA only once. I told myself I could have accomplished many things outside in six months. But when I look back, I find that what I would have accomplished was accomplished anyway without me.

For six months, God wanted to show me that I was not as indispensable as I thought. He was the one in control.

My friend Marcel often told me: you are in a hurry to get out. What is there outside that you want to do and cannot do here? He said that often what we want to do outside is just restlessness, and it often ends in problems. God is in control; you are restless for nothing.

The Bible indeed speaks of another rhythm. A rhythm that escapes our calendars. God is never in a hurry. He does not speed up to conform to our deadlines. He acts according to a time that surpasses our impatience.

Abraham waited years before seeing the promise fulfilled. Joseph went through seasons of injustice before reaching his mission. David was anointed king long before ascending the throne. All of them lived through that uncomfortable in-between, that time when nothing seems to move forward, but where everything is being prepared.

Prison placed me in that in-between. A suspended time, without clear visibility, without control. A time where you learn to live without a reassuring deadline. Where you stop asking *when*, and begin working on *how*.

This slowing down taught me something essential: maturation cannot be negotiated. It demands time. You can speed up technical processes, but not inner transformation. The soul does not rush.

I also understood that our spiritual impatience often resembles our existential impatience. We want to understand quickly, heal quickly, get out quickly. But God works in depth, rarely in haste.

Here is an image that helped me understand better.

God plants a seed, but we want it to grow quickly. But He takes the time to remove the weeds around it, to water it, to put up protection when the little shoot emerges. But we are restless.



The slow rhythm of eternity does not mean inaction. It means rightness. Each thing in its time. Each step respected. Each season traversed without being burned through.

Prison does not only slow the body. It slows life.

Outside, everything moves fast. Decisions, travel, conversations, projects. You live in permanent urgency, in agitation, with the feeling that everything must move forward, right now. Time is an adversary you try to catch up with.

In prison, the rhythm changes abruptly.

Days can be filled with activities — conversations, football, television, services — but the underlying pace of time remains slow. Nothing can be rushed. Procedures take months. Answers are delayed. Dates are vague. You learn to live without a reliable calendar. We do not wear watches.

At first, this slowness is torture.

You watch time pass without being able to speed it up. You count the weeks. You calculate. You project ahead. Then you grow tired of counting. The days end up looking alike, and impatience becomes a constant weight.

And like David Thoreau, you realize that you need very little to live — even to live happily in a place where you are supposed to be unhappy.

But something transforms when you stop fighting against the rhythm.

You begin to see what you never saw before: the value of a simple moment, of a real conversation, of a verse meditated at length, of a shared silence. Life is no longer divided into performances, but into presences.

I often remembered that God does not work at our pace.

The time of men seeks efficiency. The time of eternity seeks depth.

I wanted things to move fast. God seemed to work slowly. Not out of indifference, but because He was not merely building an external outcome. He was working on my vision, my patience, my faith.

Slowness was no longer a void. It was becoming a workshop.

In this slower rhythm, I discovered a form of peace I had not known. Not the peace of someone who controls the situation, but that of someone who accepts not understanding everything right away.

Prison taught me to walk more slowly with God.

Not to demand immediate answers. To let time do its inner work. To believe that even when nothing seems to move, something is being built.

The slow rhythm of eternity does not align with our impatience. But it aligns with our transformation.

And sometimes, life must stop for the soul to finally learn to breathe at that pace.

However, I do not necessarily agree with the African saying that the White man has the watch and the African has the time. That would be endorsing idleness.

Third lesson: God often works more slowly than our expectations... but more deeply than our plans.

And you?

- At what pace are you living today?
- Does your schedule respect your soul?
- Become aware of your impatience. Behind it often hides a fear that needs soothing.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Chapter 10 (Lesson 4) — Loving Freely

Prison strips away many things. But it also reveals what remains when all self-interest disappears.

Outside, love is often mixed with invisible exchanges. We love, but we expect something in return: recognition, loyalty, gratitude, sometimes simply a place in the other person's life. Even our generous gestures sometimes carry a trace of unconscious calculation.

In prison, this logic cracks.

Many young inmates I met were alone. Truly alone. Their families no longer came. Their loved ones had vanished. Some were forgotten, others rejected. Shame, poverty, or fear had severed the bonds.

They had no one to bring them a little money, clothes, a word of encouragement. No one to remind them that they still had value in someone's eyes.

At first, I watched this distress with compassion... but from a distance. Then, little by little, something changed.

Loving, here, could not be theoretical.

You had to share a little of what you received. Give soap. Offer a meal. Listen to a story told ten times over. Step in to ease a conflict. Encourage a young man who wanted to abandon all hope.

No one officially obligated us to do this. There was no reward, no special recognition.

Sometimes those you helped did not even say thank you. Some fell back into their mistakes.

Others vanished overnight, transferred elsewhere.

And yet, these gestures carried immense weight.

They were free.

The Good Samaritan does not ask whether the wounded man deserves to be helped. He does not check whether he will be thanked. He stops, treats, leaves. Without strategy.



In prison, this parable takes on particular depth. The opportunities to love are discreet, modest, often invisible. Sharing a meal. Listening to a story told a hundred times. Supporting someone who is falling apart without being able to fix them. These are simple gestures, but they require true inner availability.

That is where I understood differently what it means to love as God loves.

God consistently emphasizes care for the most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the weak. Those who can give nothing back. Those whose fragility prevents any balanced reciprocity.

To love freely is to love without guarantee of return. It is to love because the other is a human being, not because they might become useful.

John 3:16 is often quoted, but 1 John 3:16 should also be read.

Prison taught me that true love begins where self-interest ends.

Outside, we often choose our relationships. They form around affinities, mutual advantages, shared projects. In prison, love takes on a different face: it becomes an act of decision.

Deciding to see the other person. Deciding not to look away. Deciding to give a little of what you have, even when you have little.

Those young inmates taught me as much as I gave them. Their vulnerability reminded me that I too needed grace. That no one stands solely by their own strength.

To love freely is to accept giving without controlling the outcome.

God does not love us because we deserve it. He loves us because He is love. Prison gave me a concrete ground to practice this unconditional love.

And I discovered that this love frees the giver as much as the receiver.

In a place where many had been abandoned, free love became a silent resistance. A way of saying: you are not reduced to your mistake. You still matter.

Prison taught me to love without strategy. Without calculation. Without expectation.

Just because the other person is there.

Fourth lesson: The most powerful love is the one that seeks nothing in return.

And you?

- In which relationships do you still love with hidden expectations?
- What would happen if you loved without calculation, without a script, without guarantees?
- Choose a simple, free gesture, with no expected return.

“Love does not seek its own interests.” (1 Corinthians 13:5)

Chapter 11 (Lesson 5) — Learning Resilience

One of the most important qualities in difficult times is resilience. It is often confused with courage, but it is not quite the same thing.

Courage helps you face a shock. Resilience helps you endure over time.

The word comes from the physical world. A resilient material is able to return to its shape after being deformed. A rubber band stretched and then snapping back is a simple image.

But in human beings, resilience goes further.

We never come back exactly as before. We come back marked... but expanded.



Prison: An Ordeal of Duration

Prison is not a one-time shock. It is a slow wearing down.

It is not just the first days that are difficult. It is the weeks that look alike. The months without answers. The procedures that do not move forward. The hopes that rise... then fall.

Resilience is not about being strong one day. It is about not letting the repetition destroy you.

Some days, I felt solid. Other days, morally drained, tired for no specific reason.

Resilience is not denying these lows. It is refusing to settle into them.

Jeremiah: The Resilience That Weeps

We often speak of victorious biblical heroes. We speak less of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah did not lead an army. He did not see his people repent. He was rejected, mocked, imprisoned. He spoke... and almost no one listened.

And yet, he continued.

He wept. He doubted. He cried out his distress to God. But he did not abandon his mission.

His resilience was not spectacular. It was faithful.

He did not hold on because he felt strong. He held on because he remained attached to God, even when everything seemed futile.

Daniel: Silent Resilience

Daniel, for his part, traverses changes of kingdoms, exiles, political pressures. He does not make grand speeches about his suffering. He maintains a rhythm.

Prayer. Faithfulness. Inner discipline.

Daniel's resilience is not in a single heroic act. It is in daily constancy.

He continues to pray even when it becomes dangerous. He continues to be upright in a system that does not share his faith.

Resilience, sometimes, is simply continuing to be yourself... in a context that pushes you to deny yourself.

Václav Havel: The Resilience of Conscience

In modern history, this same strength appears in Václav Havel, the Czech playwright who became a dissident under the communist regime.

He spent several years in prison. He could have kept silent to be left alone. He could have given in inwardly, even without giving in publicly.

But in his prison letters, we see a man who refuses to let the system destroy his inner self. He writes, he reflects, he keeps his conscience alive. He does not become bitter; he does not reduce himself to a number.

Resilience, for him, was not about getting out quickly. It was about remaining a free man on the inside while his body was confined.

What Resilience Changed in Me

In prison, I understood that resilience plays out in small, invisible choices:

- Getting up even when I did not feel like it
- Continuing to pray even when I felt nothing
- Keeping a dignified word when frustration rose
- Refusing to become cynical

The temptation, over time, is not only sadness. It is hardening.

You can come out of an ordeal... but become hard, bitter, closed.

True resilience does not make us harder. It makes us deeper.

Coming Back... Differently

Resilience did not bring me back to the man I was before. It led me toward a man more aware of his fragility, more dependent on God, more attentive to others.

I did not merely survive prison. I learned there to hold on without closing off.

Resilience transforms survival into maturation.

Fifth Lesson

Resilience is not about never falling. It is about getting back up without losing your heart.

And you?

- When the ordeal lasts, what becomes of your heart?
- Do you resist by hardening... or by deepening?
- What small daily gestures can strengthen your endurance today?

“The righteous fall seven times, and rise again.” (Proverbs 24:16)

Chapter 12 (Lesson 6) — Finally Meeting Myself

There is one encounter you can avoid your whole life: the one with yourself.

On the outside, everything is organized to spare us from it. Responsibilities, relationships, emergencies, projects fill the space. We define ourselves by what we do, by what we wear, by what we achieve. As long as the movement continues, introspection can wait.

Prison makes this escape impossible.

Later, I discovered that Carl Jung spoke of “the shadow”: that part of ourselves we do not want to see, but which always accompanies us. Prison brought down my defenses. My shadow had nowhere left to hide.

Time repeats itself. Days look alike. Distractions are rare. Gradually, the superficial layers fall away. All that remains is the man, face to face with himself, with no set to hide behind.

This encounter is not comfortable.

I discovered areas of myself that I knew poorly, or that I preferred to ignore. Defense mechanisms. Reflexes of pride. An excessive confidence in my own ability to manage, anticipate, control. Prison did not accuse me; it revealed me.

I understood that one can be sincere without being lucid. Committed without being aligned. Competent without being just.

That lucidity requires courage, because it forces you to renounce a flattering self-image. In prison, that image cracks naturally. Others see you without your social costume. And you end up seeing yourself without excessive indulgence.

In Scripture, Jacob only becomes Israel after a night of solitary wrestling. There is no audience, no witness, no glorious account. He emerges wounded, but transformed. This scene long seemed strange to me. It became familiar.



Truly meeting yourself always leaves a mark.

Prison taught me that identity is not what you proclaim, but what remains when everything else is stripped away. When past successes no longer impress. When future plans are suspended. When justifications no longer suffice.

In that stripping, a question often returned: Who am I when I no longer control the narrative?

That question is formidable, because it touches our need for control. We love to tell our story. In prison, the story escapes you. It is told by others, interpreted, often distorted. You must then learn to stand upright without a favorable narrative.

This face-to-face was demanding, but salutary. It allowed me to recognize my blind spots without condemning myself. To see my errors without being reduced to them. To understand that maturity does not consist in being irreproachable, but in being honest.

I also discovered that finally meeting yourself opens an unexpected space of peace. A peace that no longer depends on external approval. A peace that is born when you stop fighting against yourself.

Prison taught me that we do not transform by fleeing our flaws, but by looking at them truthfully. That is often where God begins His deepest work. Not in performance, but in truth.

Today, I know that this encounter was inevitable. It could have taken place differently, in a less brutal setting. But it took place there. And it laid a new foundation.

Finally meeting myself is not retreating into oneself. It is standing before God and before yourself without a mask.

And you?

- Who are you when no one is watching?
- What parts of yourself do you still avoid meeting?
- Take some time alone, without distraction, and write what you already know to be true about yourself.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart.” (Psalm 139:23)

Chapter 13 (Lesson 7) — Distinguishing the Essential from the Accessory

Prison does not complicate life. It simplifies it brutally.

On the outside, everything accumulates. Objects, commitments, relationships, expectations. We live surrounded by choices, sometimes to the point of suffocation. This abundance gives the illusion of freedom, but it often masks an inner dispersion.

In prison, that illusion vanishes. Little remains. Few personal belongings. Few decisions to make. Few distractions. This stripping acts as a developer. What you thought was indispensable ceases to be. And what remains takes on new value.

I understood that much of our exhaustion comes from carrying too many useless things. We confuse the important and the urgent, the essential and the comfortable, the necessary and the superfluous. Prison forces a sorting that freedom postpones.



This sorting is uncomfortable, because it forces you to let go. To let go of certain habits. Of certain expectations. Of certain self-images. But it is also profoundly liberating.

I discovered that the essential comes down to very little. A faithful relationship. A peaceful conscience. A living faith. Everything else, however respectable, becomes secondary when these foundations are weakened.

The apostle Paul writes that he has learned to live in abundance and in want. That sentence is not an abstract spiritual posture. It describes a rare inner freedom: that of no longer being dependent on circumstances to remain stable.

Prison taught me that outward clutter often reflects inner clutter. We fill our lives to avoid certain questions. We multiply projects to avoid confronting certain fragilities. Stripping renders these strategies useless.

In that reduced space, I learned to appreciate what is unseen. A well-chosen word. A discreet gesture of solidarity. A moment of inhabited silence. These things do not shine, but they nourish.

We had to pay for everything, including a weekly contribution for the bed and for all those who served us. Yet I needed only two hundred euros a month to live well.

Distinguishing the essential from the accessory also taught me to put certain losses in perspective. What I thought I was losing was sometimes what was keeping me from breathing fully. Prison did not take everything away. It took away what was cluttering.

Today people speak of minimalism as a trend.

One of my favorite paintings depicts an elderly man praying before his meal. That meal is nothing but a bowl of soup and bread. That is simplicity.



May our eye be clear and our heart upright.

Today, I know that this pursuit of simplicity is never achieved once and for all. It demands constant vigilance. Modern life pushes us to accumulate again, to fill, to scatter. But what I learned in prison remains a compass.

Distinguishing the essential from the accessory is not living in deprivation. It is living lighter.

And you?

- What takes up the most space in your life today?
- Does it truly nourish what is essential?
- Do a voluntary sorting: one activity, one relationship, one habit to reevaluate.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:21)

Chapter 14 (Lesson 8) — Transforming Injustice

Injustice is a slow poison.

When you feel wrongly accused, misunderstood, betrayed, it is easy to let anger settle in. It seems legitimate. It even seems necessary for self-defense. But if you are not careful, it becomes a narrower prison than the walls.

In prison, I had many reasons to be bitter. Charges that did not match my reality. Judicial delays. Misunderstandings. Losses I could not prevent. All of this could have fed a constant resentment.

At first, the temptation was strong. Replay the scenes. Imagine other outcomes. Defend yourself internally without end. But I quickly understood that this spiral changed nothing about the facts. It only confined me further.

I remembered Joseph. Betrayed by his brothers, sold as a slave, unjustly accused by Potiphar's wife, forgotten in prison. He would have had every reason to become bitter. Yet later, he would say: **“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.”**

He does not deny the evil. He does not justify the injustice. He simply recognizes that God can transform what men have twisted.

Transforming injustice does not mean accepting it as just. It means refusing to let it define your identity.

I understood that I could leave prison outwardly while remaining inwardly confined in resentment. And that prison, no one could free me from in my place.

Little by little, I began to pray differently. No longer only for the situation to change, but for my heart not to harden. So that I would not become a bitter, suspicious, closed man.

There is a difference between seeking justice... and letting bitterness govern your life.

Justice belongs to courts, procedures, men. The heart belongs to God.

Here is a photograph of a Jewish man returning to Auschwitz in Poland to forgive those who had persecuted him.



I love this English phrase: Let Go and Let God.

I did not control the judicial calendar. But I could choose not to let hatred take root. That choice was not instantaneous. It was gradual, sometimes fragile. There were setbacks, days of discouragement. But each time, I returned to this simple prayer: *Keep my heart free.*

Jesus, unjustly accused, unjustly condemned, spoke from the cross words I now understood better: **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”**

This forgiveness does not immediately change circumstances. It changes the one who forgives.

Transforming injustice means refusing to become the image of the evil you have suffered. It means letting God write a different inner ending, even if the outer story remains complicated.

I do not yet know all that God will make of this ordeal. But I know one thing: I do not want it to turn me into a hard man. I want it to teach me depth, patience, mercy.

Injustice can break a man. Or it can deepen him.

The difference plays out in the heart.

Eighth lesson: I cannot always choose what happens to me, but I can choose what it makes of me.

And you?

- What injustice have you not yet digested?
- Are you nurturing a resentment that confines you more than it protects you?
- Try to write down what this ordeal has already taught you, even partially.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)

Chapter 15 (Lesson 9) — Embracing Vulnerability

Prison makes masks fall. Not through violence, but through exhaustion.

On the outside, it is possible to maintain a posture for a long time. To show a controlled image of yourself. To hide your flaws behind competence, role, confidence. In prison, that facade does not hold. The duration, the proximity, and the repetition of days eventually crack what you wanted to protect.

I understood very quickly that vulnerability was not an option. It imposed itself. The question was not whether it would appear, but *how* I would receive it.

Many dread it. They perceive it as weakness, loss of control, danger. In prison, those who refuse to show the slightest fragility harden. They cut themselves off from everyone else. They protect themselves, but at the cost of great inner loneliness.

Conversely, I saw men open up, sometimes clumsily, sometimes painfully. They spoke of their fear, their shame, their regrets. It was not spectacular. But it was true. And that truth created unexpected bonds.

Vulnerability does not make you weak. It makes you accessible.

I myself resisted for a long time. Out of habit. Out of pride. Out of survival instinct. Recognizing your fragility means accepting that you no longer control everything. It means renouncing the illusion of self-sufficiency. In prison, that illusion dissolves quickly.

The Bible never idealizes outward strength. It speaks instead of a paradoxical strength that manifests in weakness. The apostle Paul states it plainly: *“When I am weak, then I am strong.”* That sentence long seemed abstract to me. It became concrete.

I understood that vulnerability opens a space that strength closes. A space of relationship. A space of truth. A space where you can be supported without being diminished.

Embracing your vulnerability is not exposing yourself without discernment. It is not telling everything to everyone. It is recognizing inwardly your limits, your fears, your needs. It is accepting that you do not move forward alone.

In prison, this recognition changed my relationship with others. I stopped wanting to appear solid at all times. I learned to ask, to receive, to listen. This shift brought me profound peace.

I also understood that vulnerability is a spiritual place. It is often where prayer becomes true. No longer a recitation, but a quiet cry. No longer a request for a solution, but a trusting surrender.

Jesus never hides His vulnerability. He weeps. He asks for support. He accepts being helped. This assumed humanity takes nothing from His authority. It makes it closer, more accessible, more real.



Prison taught me that vulnerability is not what weakens a life, but what makes it inhabitable. A life without apparent flaws is often a life under tension. A life that accepts its fragilities becomes more breathable.

I have a personality that is a mix of Sigma and Alpha. For such a character, vulnerability is a sign of weakness. I had to learn to show it and adopt it as a sign of strength, not weakness.

Today, I know that this lesson extends well beyond prison. In family, in work, in faith, vulnerability remains a major relational key. It disarms conflicts, opens dialogue, humanizes relationships.

Embracing vulnerability is not giving up being strong. It is choosing a more just strength.

Ninth lesson: Vulnerability accepted becomes a doorway for grace.

And you?

- What fragility do you still refuse to acknowledge?
- To whom could you simply say: *“I can’t do this alone”*?
- Observe what changes when you stop protecting yourself needlessly.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Chapter 16 (Lesson 10) — From Ordeal to Calling

Prison is never a destination. It is a passage.

No one enters with the intention of learning. You arrive constrained, surprised, sometimes broken. And yet, in hindsight, I can state without hesitation: an ordeal does not decide what it will produce. It is the way you go through it that determines the outcome.

Prison can become an inner tomb. It can also become a springboard.

I have seen both.

Some men lock themselves in further. Others, on the contrary, discover in this constrained space an unexpected freedom. An inner freedom, silent, but real.

This contrast puzzled me for a long time.

I understood that prison does not have the power to transform by itself. It reveals. It amplifies. It brings to light what was already there. What you become in it depends less on the walls than on the inner attitude you adopt facing them.

Transforming prison into a springboard is not automatic. It requires inner consent. Not to injustice, not to suffering, but to reality. Accepting to look at the ordeal without denying it, without romanticizing it, without reducing it to an absurd parenthesis.

That consent is demanding.

I had to relinquish certain expectations. The idea of a quick release. The illusion of a return to the identical. The secret hope that everything would go back to the way it was. Prison taught me that you do not go through a profound ordeal without being changed. No more than the butterfly that refuses the passage from caterpillar to cocoon. A transformation occurs through uncomfortable passages. Yet we all refuse change while desiring transformation.



And perhaps that is where the shift happens. Accepting the ordeal as coming from God, as a springboard, never takes you backward.

Prison forced me to slow down, to listen, to sort, to meet myself, to love differently, to accept my fragilities, to look at injustice without dissolving into it. All these lessons were not objectives. They emerged along the way.

Over time, I understood that this ordeal did not ask me to be heroic, but to be faithful. Faithful to what I was discovering inwardly. Faithful to the necessary adjustments. Faithful to this silent transformation taking place slowly.

In the Bible, many major trajectories pass through a place of stopping. A desert, a prison, a setting apart. These places are never glorified, but they are often decisive. They are not an end, but a preparation.

Prison did not give me a new life. It taught me to live differently.

Today, I know that this passage does not define who I am. But it is part of what has shaped me. It shifted my priorities, sharpened my choices, deepened my faith. It redesigned the way I inhabit time and relationships.

A springboard is not comfortable. It is firm.

Prison gave me that inner firmness. Not a hardness, but a new stability. The kind that allows you to move forward without arrogance and without excessive fear. The kind that accepts that certain pages must close so others can open.

I do not yet know all that the future holds. I do not control the calendar of men. But I know that this ordeal is not the end of the story.

God writes chapters we do not understand at the time.

Prison was a forced stop. I choose to make it a springboard.

Tenth lesson: A season of stopping can become the starting point of a deeper life.

And you?

- What ordeal do you still refuse to see as anything other than a loss?
- What might it be preparing, if you accepted to go through it consciously?
- Write down what this ordeal has already shifted in you, even if the road is not over.

“All things work together for good for those who love God.” (Romans 8:28)

Conclusion — What Prison Made of Me

At the beginning, I resisted prison.

I saw it as an unjust parenthesis, an interruption of my life, wasted time that I would someday have to make up. I wanted things to go back to “the way they were.” I counted the days. I dreamed of the return.

Then, slowly, something changed.

I remembered these words of Jesus: **“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”**

I entered prison wanting to survive. I came out understanding that something in me had to die so that something new could be born.

Prison stripped me.

I arrived with a few clothes. Very quickly, my accounts were frozen. My usual resources vanished. I no longer had access to what once gave me a sense of security.

And yet, I lacked nothing.

Like the prophet Elijah fed in the desert, I was sustained in a way I could not have organized myself. Through simple gestures, unexpected help, discreet acts of solidarity, God provided. Not in abundance, but in sufficiency.

I was afraid of wasting time in prison.

But looking at my life honestly, I realized that outside too, I had often gone in circles. Many things I thought required my presence were accomplished without me. The world did not stop. Projects moved forward. Life took its course.

Prison did not steal my life. It forced me to look at it differently.

I listened to hundreds of testimonies. Stories of falling, of betrayal, of mistakes, of manipulation, of injustice, of naivety too. These stories broadened my perspective. They taught

me compassion, but also lucidity. They showed me the traps a man can fall into without even realizing it.

I discovered the judicial world from the inside. Not in books, but in daily reality. I saw its complexity, its slowness, its flaws, but also the men and women who work within it conscientiously. This inside view changed the way I judge from the outside.

I also met people I would never have crossed paths with otherwise. Men of all origins, all religions, all social backgrounds. Bonds were forged where I would never have imagined finding any. Prison broke certain invisible barriers I carried without knowing it.

But above all, something transformed within me.

I see life differently. I no longer measure success only by what I produce, but by who I become. I no longer see ordeals only as obstacles, but as possible places of inner work.

Prison could have stretched my marriage, created distance, bitterness, misunderstanding. It did the opposite.

It strengthened it.

Deprived of physical presence, we learned another form of closeness. Words and shared prayers gained more value. Silences too. Faithfulness was no longer a comfortable given, but a daily choice. In this ordeal, love did not disappear; it deepened.

Claire was an unwavering support.

She carried a weight that few people see: the waiting, the procedures, the looks from others, the uncertainties. She held on when it would have been simpler to lose heart. Her faithful presence, even from a distance, was for me a tangible sign of God's grace.

To her, I want to say thank you. Thank you for your patience. Thank you for your quiet strength. Thank you for believing when I myself was weary.

Our story was not suspended by prison. It was purified by it.

Prison was not an end. It was a passage.

A painful passage, incomprehensible at times, but fruitful. What needed to fall, fell. What needed to be shaken was shaken. And in the midst of it all, a more interior life began to sprout.

I would not wish prison on anyone. But I know today that no place is too dark for God to bring something alive from it.

If you hold this book in your hands, perhaps your prison has no walls.

Perhaps you are going through a rupture, an injustice, a season of waiting, a loss of bearings.

Perhaps you feel that your life is at a standstill while the world moves on without you.

I do not claim to understand all pain. But I know one thing: an ordeal can break us... or transform us.

The difference lies not only in the circumstances, but in what we let God do within us during the crossing.

Do not let the ordeal define your ending. Do not let the difficult season steal your hope. What looks like a stop can become a beginning.

The seed does not understand why it is buried. Yet that is where it begins to bear fruit.

About the Author

Jacques Coquerel has been married to Claire for more than 35 years and is the father of three sons and grandfather of three granddaughters.

He has lived and worked on several continents, operating in demanding environments where responsibilities, decisions, and intense pace were part of daily life. His journey has been marked by varied professional experiences, deep human commitments, and a faith forged over time.

But it was a period of incarceration that profoundly redefined his way of seeing life, freedom, and what truly matters.

This season of forced stopping became a time of inner transformation, of stripping away, of silence, and of rediscovering God. This book was born from that ordeal.

Today, Jacques wishes to share these lessons freely, with the hope that they may accompany those going through their own prisons — visible or invisible.



À propos de l'auteur

Jacques Coquerel est marié à Claire depuis plus de 35 ans, père de trois garçons et grand-père de trois petites-filles.

Il a vécu et travaillé sur plusieurs continents, évoluant dans des environnements exigeants où responsabilités, décisions et rythme intense faisaient partie du quotidien. Son parcours a été marqué par des expériences professionnelles variées, des engagements humains profonds et une foi qui s'est forgée dans la durée.

Mais c'est une période d'incarcération qui a profondément redéfini sa manière de voir la vie, la liberté et l'essentiel.

Cette saison d'arrêt forcé est devenue un temps de transformation intérieure, de dépouillement, de silence et de redécouverte de Dieu.

Ce livre est né de cette épreuve. Aujourd'hui, Jacques souhaite partager librement ces leçons, avec l'espoir qu'elles puissent accompagner ceux qui traversent leurs propres prisons — visibles ou invisibles.