



Episode 3: Sebastian

Official Transcript

Worship Leader Amen. Happy Sabbath ! God is so good, is He not? And I'm going to enjoy some Jamba tonight...

Aren Last year, I attended a youth event hosted by the Two Percent Ministry, a group of Pacific Island churches on the West Coast. They created the ministry after a study revealed that of the million-plus SDA members in North America, Islander and Indigenous Communities make up just 2%—and so they wanted to do something about it. That night, “something” looked like a vespers in Southern California. The room was packed.

Singers [SINGING] We have to fight, although we have to die. We have to hold...

Aren If you've never been to a Samoan worship service, you can count on three things: good music, great food, and lots of hugs. Whether you're Samoan or not, when you step foot into the church, you become part of the family.

Singers [SINGING] Declaring the Word of the Lord...

Aren Well that night was no different. Before taking my seat, I received four hugs and a plate of food. And then we sang.

But about halfway through the service the room went silent. And I watched as a young man, late 20's, trimmed beard, walked up to the mic, and shared one of the most profound testimonies I had ever heard. It was delivered as a spoken word, the artform of poetic performance, and told of his personal experience with depression, and the stigma surrounding mental health and Polynesian men. It hit me right in the chest.

After the service, I tracked down the artist to say thank you, but I also had more questions. So I asked if he'd be willing to meet together and share more of his story with me, and that's how I met Sebastian. And today, you get to meet him too, and hear his story of faith, struggle, and art. You'll also hear a portion of the testimony he shared that night—and what this spoken word artist has to say now to you and to me. Stay with us.

Sebastian Hi, my name is Sebastian, and this is *Dear Church*.

. . .

Aren Can you tell us about how you discovered the art form of spoken word?

Sebastian Okay, so, probably my teens. I watched a lot of battle rap, so—

Aren And for those who don't know what battle rap is, can you explain it?

Sebastian So battle rap is basically when you have two rappers that kind of create their own rap verses and they kind of battle each other. And sometimes they create their verses that are tailored to the opponent. So sometimes there's like, they can get personal, and they could start, you know, talking about certain things in your life that may be personal, but it's to, like, beat that specific opponent.

Battle Rapper *Yo DJ D-Wrek, drop the beat. [RAPPING] Big Snoop Dogg, straight repping the blues, but how you gonna Crip Walk with them ugly church shoes?*

[LAUGHTER]

Aren So you got into battle rap, and how did that lead to spoken word?

Sebastian Yeah. So, I think it was just the way battle rappers used metaphors. There's something about the way they write. It's just so complex, from like punch lines to similes to metaphors. And that thing really caught my attention. And I was just like, man, this art form is pretty interesting. Like, I actually enjoy this, right?

And then it made me want to start writing. So I was writing rhymes, but like, I really couldn't pull nothing from my life because it's just like, I go to an SDA Church. So it's just like there's nothing I can really rap about, so. [LAUGHS]

Yeah, so I was writing rhymes but like just, you know, just bragging about myself. And then I found a battle rapper who was a Christian battle rapper. He's a Christian battle rapper, but it was so interesting how he was able to use like metaphors and punch lines and put it into like a spoken word, so it sounded like he was battling, but at the same time he was actually bringing a message. It was just like, man, this is, this is pretty dope.

And when I'd gone through the depression that I went through, like, I had something to actually pull from and write about my experience. I think before, like I wasn't, I was kind of just going through life, so I felt like I'd really didn't have anything to pull from. But when I finally had difficult trials and tribulations and things like that, being able to, you know, craft that into spoken word, it was an outlet for me.

Aren Can you remember the first time you ever performed a spoken word piece in front of an audience?

Sebastian I was invited by a brother of mine, they were doing like a youth service. I think for me I had it sitting there and I felt like I needed to just get it out. And it also felt validating because people were reacting to it. You know, you can hear people in the crowd like, "Oh, like okay!" And having that, it was just like, okay, I feel like I've found something that I'm good at.

Aren Do you have an idea of how many spoken word poems you've written?

Sebastian I want to say four or five.

Aren And which one are you most proud of?

Sebastian The one that I just did involving male depression. The one that I did at the event that you were there, the Two Percent event.

Aren Yeah. I think you call it "Polynesian Men"? Is that the title?

Sebastian Yeah, "For My Polynesian Men."

Aren And what's the story behind that piece?

Sebastian That story, it talks about what depression looks like in Polynesian men. It talks about how depression is viewed within our Polynesian culture. And it also talks about how to break that idea of how we should view mental health or depression, period. So I go through each part, like this is what it looks like and this is what we feel, but I'm tired of feeling that way silently so I'm gonna tell you what we need to do.

Sebastian [SPOKEN WORD] When it comes to—when it comes to Polynesian men dealing with depression. We're hidden in plain sight as we grapple with life. Forced to hide behind cultural constructs of what a man is supposed to be. Forced to carry this vitality type. 'Twas the term, safe space? It's just a mythical land which I guess makes us fictional characters, but fiction can be sadly substituted for reality the day tragedy strikes.

Sebastian I think the first thing that I had to do before even sharing it is I had to put myself in that space again where I was depressed and I was going through it and then carry that on stage.

Sebastian [SPOKEN WORD] Depression as a Polynesian man. It puts us in a dark space, caught between wanting to release our real emotions and the cultural pressures of a man which increases loneliness and heartache. But we keep to ourselves to avoid being objectified or disapproved which creates this electrifying move which often seems have us stuck between The Rock and a hard place, so we dig a deeper hole for ourselves. In a grave of loneliness that has us stuck as if time stopped, negative thoughts degrade our brain to a point where our mind rots, but that pain we hide it well, become imposters, king of lyin' like Mufasa, just so we can avoid the idea of getting our pride rocked.

Aren What is the perception of mental health and therapy in the Samoan community?

Sebastian Mental health is not really something that's at the forefront of our culture, especially as a Samoan man. I feel like for men in general, but like Samoan culture, we're taught to be, I guess, stone faced. You know, figure it out. Having emotions is going to just slow things down for you. You can't cry over spilled milk. You better push through it and figure it out.

Aren When you work in youth ministry, you become painfully aware of the mental health obstacles young people face. I wanted to know more about how this is specifically felt in the Pacific Islander community, so I sat down with Pastor Meshach Soli. He's my colleague at SECC Youth and board chairman of the Two Percent Ministry. He's also a mentor to Sebastian.

Meshach Mental health was not, it wasn't even verbalized. We didn't even have a name for it. It was nonexistent. We would just kind of brush it off as that's just the way they are, or we would label it in our language as terms of, oh, they're just kind of,

they're missing a screw kind of, kind of thing. And that's as far as it got. There was no, why is he missing a screw? What could be causing these mental challenges for not just our young people, our people in general? We just treated it as if that's just the way things are. That's the way people are. And mental health was not even on our radar as a culture.

Aren How come?

Meshach I think there was a lack of knowledge and education has a lot to do with it. I think growing up on the island you don't have the resources that we have, you know, here in the states. And so to talk about mental health, and that that could be a medical condition, was foreign to the people on the islands. And so of course that trickles down to the next generation, which is my generation. And then when you get to my kids' generation, they're the ones that are like, no, this is a thing.

In our community too, a lot of them just, because you can't talk to your parents about these things, because they don't, they don't seem to have the answers, you tend to deal with it yourself. And that oftentimes will lead to addictions, substance abuse, alcohol abuse, violence—and that's just a mask that covers the real issue that they're just lashing out because they're not able to articulate their emotions or their feelings in a healthy way. And so automatically they're going to go the route that helps them maybe numb it, forget about it, or just kind of put it to the side.

Aren Is that part of why you helped start the Two Percent Ministry?

Meshach Yeah, so the inspiration behind that is the struggle that we see within our young people: Pacific Islanders, Samoans, Tongans, Fijians, Micronesians, you name it. They're leaving in droves. And what I've come to realize, it's not just in the Samoan Church, that's in all of our churches. But because we're such a small percentage, like who's going to stop the hemorrhaging? So we took it upon ourselves to create something that can stop the hemorrhaging and make a difference in our young people's lives.

Sebastian Even growing up around Samoans that were a lot bigger than me, I was a skinny Samoan and a lot of them, were physically—they had physical abilities that I didn't. So they were able to look more manly I guess to a degree, like, you know, with the how big they are and how they present themselves. But that's not to say—you know, Samoans are loving people. Like, they look intimidating but they're very loving people. But I think in a Samoan culture like, you know, there's these constructs of how a man is supposed to be, and I didn't fit. I didn't fit, you know, that mold.

Aren Sebastian was raised in Compton, California, a city known for both its high crime rates and its influence in rap culture. He's the oldest of three: Mom was more lenient, Dad was more strict—and church mattered.

Sebastian Growing up in a Samoan household, I would say it's kind of, it kind of aligns with how life wasn't for me in church. Like, things you do and things you don't do. And I feel like those kind of connected with each other to a degree.

Aren Did you enjoy church when you were younger?

Sebastian Yeah, when I was younger, I think the one thing that I enjoyed about church was just the community and the family, the family aspect, right? Be a part of the youth, be a part of pathfinders, whatever the case may be.

Aren How far did you get in Pathfinders?

Sebastian Man, I'm gonna be honest. [LAUGHS] I'm gonna be honest with you, my Pathfinder years didn't really look like every normal SDA Pathfinder that has gone through pathfinders. My dad was the Pathfinder leader, but all we did was just sing. Yeah, my dad always taught songs, and there was nothing wrong with that, you know, I mean, like we had Pathfinder uniforms on, but—

Aren You just sang.

Sebastian Yeah, all we did was sing for church. I'm sorry, Dad, sorry to put you on blast.

But I had an uncle that came in as a new Pathfinder leader and he said, "Okay, I'm gonna show you how to really be a Pathfinder." And then we went to this Pathfinder camp and we had to learn all these knots and all these bird sounds and I'm like, what is this? This is different. I thought we were just supposed to be singing, like, I thought Pathfinders was just the choir. I didn't know we were trying to be something like, I didn't know that.

Aren I thought we just put on a uniform and sing songs. [LAUGHS]

Sebastian Yeah, exactly. I was like, oh, okay, this is different. I could probably count the amount of badges I got on one hand. Probably like four, probably like four and they'd be like, you know, right here in the corner and then everything is just empty, so.

Aren When Sebastian was 12, his dad called a family meeting. He announced that he had decided to become a pastor and would need to go to seminary. And so they would all be moving from California to Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Sebastian He sat us down and said, "You know, now that I'm a pastor, things are gonna be a little different. You know the way you present yourself, people are going to, I guess, micromanage the way you behave, right? And they're going to be on you. They're going to be looking at you and they're gonna look at you and it's gonna look like it's a reflection of me."

Aren What was it like for you to go from living in California to living in Berrien Springs, Michigan?

Sebastian Oh man, that was a culture shock for sure. Like, and it wasn't even just the Michigan culture, but it was SDA culture. We had the beliefs, you know, we followed the beliefs and what not, but there were certain cultural things that I didn't know, like there was a lot of Ellen G White stuff that I didn't know. Hearing things about drums and then hearing things about going to the movies and then haystacks. [LAUGHS] Vegetarianism, like all this stuff, like it was all new to me.

And I'll give you another example. The way kids dressed in the church when we're in San Jose, it was different than the way kids dressed at Andrews. Like, everybody, all the kids had nice suits on and everything. And me and my brother came to church and we were wearing Nike sweat suits. And to us that was like, "Oh, this is our best. This is our Sabbath best." So, we got to Andrews and it was such a culture shock because I was like, "Why are these kids all dressed like adults? Only adults dressed, like, wearing suits and everything like that." And it was so different. I'm like, "Man, this is, I feel out of place. I feel like I don't belong here," right?

Aren Did you ever get to feel like you fit in, or was that your entire time at Michigan it kind of felt like that?

Sebastian I felt like once I started getting used to just SDA culture and just the culture over there, I fit in a little bit.

One thing I loved about Andrews was that there wasn't just one specific church. It was so diverse in terms of the type of churches that they had over there and the type of worship that you have over there. So that was something that I gravitated more towards.

Aren Once his dad graduated, the family moved back west, and then kept moving. Sebastian went to four different high schools in four years. When he was 19, he met a girl on MySpace that turned into a five-year relationship. They got engaged and Sebastian began dreaming of a wedding and a family. But a year later, she broke it off. There were a number of reasons why, but by the time it ended, it happened over the phone. He was devastated.

Sebastian From that point on I kind of just spiraled. I was just like not motivated to do anything because, you gotta understand, that relationship, that was a five-year relationship. And we were engaged for a year and a half, so six and a half years. That's all I knew. So, to have that taken away, I was just like, "I don't know." I didn't feel motivated to do anything.

Sebastian [SPOKEN WORD] Depression clouds over our heads, anxiety paralyzes our body and we're forced to stand in the rain, wanting so badly to find a place where we can release these tears of loneliness, as we never gave through the strain. But our culture has no place for us to release these dark thoughts without people judging, minimizing, or invalidating our pain, so to avoid all that commotion and all your preconceived notions, we suffer in silence, lost in the city of our minds, not knowing which streets to take, and we carry on like Chris Brown and Drake, and we just roam with no guidance. And I'm deciding myself without no guidance or help which often leaves our Polynesian kings dying in silence because of silence itself.

Sebastian I didn't know what to do. I had this whole plan set out, like, I'm going to get married. I'm going to have kids. I'm going to get my degree. We're going to do this, like, so to have this whole plan set up, and then have it taken away, like, you don't know what to do. You don't know what to do. And it's just like, man. So that's when I kind of started wilding out and I was, like, going out drinking and what not. Because I didn't care. I have no direction right now.

Aren Were you getting any kind of care or support? I mean, you were clearly going through a heartbreaking experience in your life. Were you pretty alone?

Sebastian So a lot of that was just me carrying it by myself because I was just too stubborn to ask people for help. And it's funny because my parents could see it. Like, they could see something was wrong, but I didn't really try and engage with them about it because I was just like, no—it was a burden I didn't want them to carry either.

Aren Did you talk to any type of counselor or therapist when your breakup happened?

Sebastian No. My therapist was going out. That was my therapist.

Sebastian [SPOKEN WORD] But no more. Because honestly? I am sick and tired of being quiet about the battle we go through. Allow me to be eloquent in my truth.

I'm not a Dumbo to the subject so I'm gonna address the elephant in the room.

About a culture that avoids this difficult conversation, I'm sorry that I'm not sorry that what I'm saying is true, and I'm not sorry how discussing fighting for our life is too awkward of a conversation for you.

Because we created a culture where male vulnerability is shunned, which is toxic.

Absurd thoughts, blindfolding ourselves to suicide, putting our cries for help inside of a bird box. Sometimes dealing with unresolved family history, causing us to look at ourselves with that shame. We sweep it under the rug because instead of saving your kid from a lifetime of trauma and depression, we'd rather save the reputation of a last name.

Aren Sebastian began looking for meaning in his life. He read books, listened to sermons, and decided God was leading him to move back to Michigan, of all places, to study to become a pastor.

Sebastian I was just like, "You know what? I think I need to be in ministry. I gotta do it!" Know what I mean, and I felt like this was it because I felt like if you want to be a part of God's work, it has to be ministry. That's what it looks like, right? So, I was still going to do my bachelors for behavioral science. But I was just like, after behavioral science I'm going to be in ministry, and this is it.

Aren What was the response you were getting when you told people that?

Sebastian Oh man everybody loved it. Everybody loved it. And I think having that validation, it made me feel like, you know what, this is it. Like, this is where I need to be. In my mind I was like, “Doing God's work, it's ministry. This is what it looks like.”

Aren Can you talk a little bit to about what it means to be a pastor in the Samoan community?

Sebastian Man. So, when it comes to pastors in Samoan culture, oh my gosh. Like, they really show love to their pastors. Like, any person that's a person of God, they're always going to find a way to show their appreciation, whether it's giving them money or giving them food or just giving them things that they need. Like, we're gonna give you the whole thing, the works. We're going to give you the works and we're going to take care of you. And I seen that a lot from my pops. It's just like he'll come and then he'll show up and they'll give him something just because he's a pastor and they have so much respect for people that are in ministry.

Aren Here's Pastor Meshach again.

Meshach In the Salmon Culture, becoming a pastor is probably one of the most prominent positions that you could hold. And so for his dad to be a pastor and, you know, everybody's always like, oh, one of your kids has to become a pastor and that's just the way that things flow. And when Sebastian felt the call to go there, I believe there was a lot of expectations, unrealistic expectations that are put on just PK's in general, but especially pastors' kids that are going into ministry.

Aren Meshach hired Sebastian to serve as an intern at his church so he could gain experience. It started out fine, but Sebastian knew something didn't feel right.

Sebastian It wasn't so much as not feeling worthy of being called “Pastor” as much as it was feeling like I was a puzzle piece trying to force myself into a place I didn't belong. But the thing is I felt horrible about it. I felt bad because it was just like, why

am I feeling this way? I shouldn't be feeling—this is God's work. I should be happy that I have this opportunity to shadow somebody such as Pastor Meshach and, like, it doesn't feel like it's it.

Aren The truth was, Sebastian had found himself secretly drawn to another career path, one he had never considered before. It started after a conversation at Samoan Church Campmeeting with another pastor who asked about how ministry was going.

Sebastian I was just like, “I don't feel like I fit.” And she told me, “Well, what do you like about it?” And I was like, “I'm gonna be honest with you. One of the things that I really liked was when I was able to sit in on some counseling sessions with Pastor Meshach. Being able to sit in those sessions, I was like, ‘Yo, I am really engaged in this, like, this is—I like this.’”

And then she threw the idea like, “Well, maybe you should go into therapy.” And I was like, “I wouldn't even know where to go.” And then she looked up, she pulled out her phone and then she gave me the website and it was like an application. And she was like, “Here.” It felt like something clicked, but I was just like, “Nah, nah, this isn't it.” She's said, “Well, maybe you should just apply and see if God opens the door.” And I'm like, “Wow.”

So, after that conversation I just have this whole new road that was given to me. Like, this whole new idea of the road I need to take.

Meshach He comes into office, we have this conversation and he says, “I don't think that I'm actually called to pastoral ministry.” And I was like, I was blown away because, you know, I wasn't expecting that. And then he goes into giving his reason why. He's just like, “I don't, I don't really see myself in that role. That doesn't really excite me, or just I don't feel a passion towards that area.” And then he goes, “But the area that I do get excited about is whenever we talk to people. When we sit down to the counseling sessions, the Bible studies.” He's like, “Those one-on-one sessions is the things that I feel really excited about.”

Aren I mean, how, how were you feeling? Were you at all disappointed or what were your feelings as he was telling you this?

Meshach I was not disappointed. I was actually—I was excited and happy for him that he made that decision. And when he told me that he was going into marriage & family therapy, that's when I opened the conversation, told him, “Look, ministry isn't just pastoral ministry. You can be a minister in anything that you do. Like, there's administrative pastors, there's worship pastors.” And this is exactly what I told him, I said, “We probably need more marriage & family therapists in the church right now than we do pastors.” And I was kind of encouraged that he wasn't just like walking away from ministry, but he was pursuing another avenue of ministry.

Sebastian When he found out like what I wanted to do—man, he was on my team. Like, he was like, “Okay, what do we need to do? What do we need to do to, you know, get you to be there?”

Aren Wow. When you had had your own mental health journey, how did that play into you wanting to now become a therapist?

Sebastian I think that played a key role into why I'm here. Because grieving the loss of this story of how my life is supposed to look. I had to grieve that loss alone. And being able to just journey through that depression and come out, come out of it, it made me feel like I had a story to tell being a mental health professional, right? Because I feel like I identify with a lot of people that are dealing with anxiety, that are dealing with depression, or that are, you know, dealing with things that affect their mental health. And that's just like man, I want to be that person for others that nobody else was for me at the time.

Meshach I think this generation, they're so brave. Even like for Sebastian too. I think part of the reason him stepping into that role also is because he deals with it himself. And now he's like, “Yo, I can actually go into a field where I can start helping my

own peers this next generation.” And that already shows me that there is definitely a shift in how we're dealing with mental health.

Even my parents, that's a trip, like, my parents have taken the time to listen to us express to them about mental health and some of the challenges that we face because they didn't know better. And so, they're having the conversation with us because now they're worried about their grandkids. And that has opened up a lot of room for growth and healing. So yeah, we're definitely not where we need to be, but thank God we're not where we used to be.

Sebastian [SPOKEN WORD] But I ain't with that, I ain't trying to perpetuate the cycle, I'm trying to change the situation. I want our people to navigate this issue, put you up on game if it requires more education to get more clarification, I hope you hear what I'm stating. I'm trying to renovate this culture we live in, like this is gentrification. See this? This is for the fellas that are fighting in silence, who see no end on the outset. Like draining the battery down to the last 2%. This here is to show you your voice is an outlet. To show you that the fact that you're still on this earth means your purpose in life is not done, and that there's more courage found in a man that can admit their weaknesses, than a man who fronts like he ain't got none.

Aren So you are a therapist in training...

Sebastian Right.

Aren You are a spoken word artist.

Sebastian Yeah.

Aren What is the connection between those two?

Sebastian I would say spoken word for me is a coping skill. I feel like as a therapist we teach our clients different coping skills of how to manage different situations. For

me, that's what spoken poetry is for me. It's therapeutic. It's a way to get something that's really heavy on my chest and just to put it on the table and like, here it is.

I'm speaking for somebody. I don't know who they are, but I'm speaking for somebody. And if I don't do this, who knows if they'll ever feel encouraged to even want to speak. You know what I mean? Anytime I step into that space, I always feel like it's an assignment, like, it's an assignment for me.

Sebastian [SPOKEN WORD] This is speaking out to be heard. This is what has been missing. We don't need people trying to dissect what is wrong with us, sometimes we just need you to shut up and listen. This is our turn to speak about how we've been fighting with resilience. So don't judge this book by its cover if you're illiterate to the experience.

I wrote this to empower somebody to finally break the silence and release their pain and their sorrow. Because if we can allow these difficult conversations to happen today, I can only imagine the generation we'll save tomorrow.

[APPLAUSE]

Aren Can we hear your letter to the Church?

Sebastian Yeah.

Dear Church,

Church it's been a while since I've had a conversation with you, but I'm glad we were able to sit down and connect. First of all, I just want to take this time to thank you.

You know, there was a time in my life you were family to me. I looked at you as family growing up.

Church, remember, remember when we were little kids, Church, and we would see each other on Sabbath and we'd talk about all the things we did within that last

week? We'd meet up at Sabbath School and me and you would talk about, you know, all the Pokémon episodes that we watched within that week? Those were fun times. And they were simpler times.

But as time went on, things changed and you started to look at me different. And for some reason it felt like there was always something that you were irritated with. You looked at my clothes and you scoffed. You tried controlling my interests and judged.

Church, for the longest time you've tried to grow me into a carbon copy version of what you wanted me to be and I think it hindered my ability, let alone the confidence, to just be me. And I think that probably was the issue. I never felt like I could be myself. You told me constantly that life needs to be done in this particular order, and if it doesn't then it doesn't count. You attempted to clone your journey and copy and paste it to my life. Because to you, correction was more important than connection.

See, what God had to help me unlearn, as someone who actually grew up in the Church, was that he cannot truly have a real relationship with the person that I'm not. God wants to bless who you are, not the person we pretend to be. And when you allow this next generation to truly be themselves, they'll feel like their voice is important and understood. And to me, there's nothing that builds community more than when you feel fully seen, fully heard, and fully understood.

And to the next generation, I pray you find a space where you can feel comfortable being your authentic self, while at the same time being okay with being challenged and encouraged to be a better you. Because when you can find that balance, there's no telling what God can do in your life.

Aren Sebastian, thank you so much.

Sebastian No, thank you. Thank you for having me.

Dear Church is a production of SECC Youth and the Southeastern California Conference. It is engineered by JO Cordero and hosted and edited by me, Aren Rennacker. Cover art by Taji Saleem. Thanks also to Blue Dot Sessions, they provide our music.

Special thanks to our guests today, Pastor Meshach Soli, and Sebastian Lafo. Since we spoke, Sebastian has completed his Masters in Marriage & Family Therapy from Loma Linda University. Just this past month, he marched across the stage to receive his degree, with Pastor Meshach in attendance.

Graduation Announcer Sebastian Lafo.

[SAMOAN FA'AUMU]

Meshach Let's go 'Bas!

[SAMOAN FA'AUMU]

Meshach Let's go!

Aren Sebastian says his goal is to one day work with formerly incarcerated individuals. This Spring, he became the proud new father of a baby girl.

If you would like to learn more about this project, visit SECCYouth.com/DearChurch, and if you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to our feed and rate and review our show so more people can find us. Thank you so much for listening, we hope you join us again next week for another episode of *Dear Church*.