

FOREWORD BY JENTEZEN FRANKLIN

DEFY

BENNY TATE

THE

WITH BRITTANY MCKNEELY

ODDS

HOW GOD
CAN USE YOUR
PAST TO SHAPE
YOUR FUTURE

“Finally, my friend Benny Tate has put his amazing story into print! He turned life’s test into a testimony, and he gives you principles as to how you can do it too! Each chapter is personal, practical, and powerful! I read the first chapter and was hooked. You will be as well!”

John C. Maxwell,

author and founder of the John Maxwell Team,
the John Maxwell Co., and EQUIP Leadership

“It’s my great privilege to recommend the book *Defy the Odds* by my dear friend Benny Tate. From the very beginning of his life, even until now, he has by the grace of God defied the odds at every turn. No matter how helpless or hopeless you may think your situation is, if you read this book you will be convinced otherwise. I cannot commend it too highly.”

James Merritt,

host of *Touching Lives*, senior pastor of Cross Pointe Church,
former president of the Southern Baptist Convention

“Talk about an underdog. What are the chances or the odds? Yet God! In His mercy, He took Benny Tate’s mess and performed a miracle. Need hope? It’s in the pages of this book!”

Johnny Hunt,

senior vice president Evangelism/Pastoral Leadership,
North American Mission Board,
former president Southern Baptist Convention,
pastor emeritus First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Georgia

“Pastor Benny speaks wisdom in practical ways we can grasp and apply to our own lives. His message is authentic because he has lived it in his own life. He doesn’t preach from a lofty tower; he wasn’t born in a pulpit. His life had a dreadful beginning, but he chose to surrender his life fully to the One who had a good plan for his life—Jesus Christ. This is his story.”

Ruth Graham,

author of *Forgiving My Father*, *Forgiving Myself*

“Whatever or whoever is standing in your way will be removed from your life! How can I say that? If God can do that for my friend Benny Tate, He will do the same for you. *Defy the Odds* may just be the most transparent and transformative book you will read. Not only will you read it, you will want all those you love to read it too. I’ve known Pastor Benny Tate for many years, and reading this book only increased my respect, admiration, and honor for him.”

Sam Chand,
leadership consultant and author of *Harnessing the Power of Tension*

“Pastor Benny Tate’s story is one of both inspiration and faith. The guy who starts on third base, gets home, and acts as though he hit a home run has never impressed me. My good friend Pastor Tate not only didn’t start on third base, he wasn’t even in the stadium. His life is proof that if you have faith and the right mindset and belief, you can truly do anything and defy all odds.”

John Calipari,
head coach, University of Kentucky men’s basketball

“Benny Tate is no stranger to adversity and heartache. However, his story is a perfect example of how God can overcome every difficult circumstance and use anyone regardless of their past. This book offers hope to all who read it! Each chapter provides practical application for believing God for big things and trusting Him to defy the odds in your life.”

Dr. Robert Jeffress,
senior pastor, First Baptist, Dallas, Texas

“This story of a brave young man from an ungodly background with the courage to defy the odds as a pastor and leader is a challenge to every Christian to stand firm in the faith.”

Mrs. Adrian (Joyce) Rogers,
author and board member of Love Worth Finding Ministries

“*Defy the Odds* by my friend Benny Tate will strengthen your faith in the fact that with God, all things are possible!”

Jim Cymbala,
pastor, Brooklyn Tabernacle

“Benny Tate’s life could have turned out much differently, but he made the decision to break the chains that had imprisoned his family legacy. Through incredible storytelling, harrowing true stories, and pinpoint biblical truths, Benny teaches how readers can defy the odds and overcome the struggles and challenges of this broken world.”

Reverend Will Graham,
vice president, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

“I was not prepared for how much I would enjoy Benny Tate’s book. When I finished, I asked myself, *Is this not the most encouraging book I have ever read?* If you have felt you were born with all good possibilities completely against you, this is the book for you. If you feel there is no hope, this is your book. If you feel life has been unfair to you, this is your book. God has raised up Benny Tate to demonstrate to the world what God can do with the most impossible situation. Benny Tate also happens to be a gifted writer, which will make this book easy reading for you. If you are ready to be uplifted, start reading now!”

R.T. Kendall,
Christian writer, speaker, teacher,
and 25-year-pastor of Westminster Chapel

“Benny Tate’s story is one of pain and triumph. It’s a real-life exhibit of 2 Corinthians 1, where the apostle Paul tells us that the help you have received in your tough times allows you to help others. *Defy the Odds* brings help and hope to people’s lives.”

Tim Dilena,
senior pastor of Times Square Church, New York City

“Overcoming life’s greatest obstacles is impossible on your own, but with God, all things are possible. *Defy the Odds* paints a wonderful picture of how God can use any person regardless of their past mistakes or difficult circumstances. If you need to be reminded that God can use you to accomplish great things, Benny Tate’s story will encourage you to trust that God can transform your life in unimaginable ways!”

Roma Downey,

Emmy®-nominated actress, producer,
and *New York Times* bestselling author

“If you meet Benny Tate, the words within these pages become all the more miraculous. It’s not only his accomplishments, which are many. It’s not just the people who love him, which are even more. It’s his attitude and spirit, and it’s his willingness to help you reach your own destiny any way he can. That’s the most miraculous of all.”

Todd Tilghman,

recording artist and winner of season 18 of NBC’s *The Voice*

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BENNY TATE

WITH BRITTANY MCKNEELY



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
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To my wife, Barbara

Without you there would be no book—
you believed in it long before I ever did.
You have always been my biggest supporter,
and I believe many of the amazing things
God has allowed me to do have been because
of your prayers over the years. You are
my greatest blessing, and I love you!

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FOREWORD

It's rare to find a pastor who is as comfortable in front of corporate giants and US senators as he is with his own congregation. Whether he's speaking to executives at Delta Air Lines, ServiceMaster, or Chick-fil-A or to his own congregation, Benny has a way of relating core scriptural values and principles that transcend titles and stations in life, all in such a way that people are truly inspired to take action and create change.

Defy the Odds takes you behind the curtain and offers life lessons forged in the pain and triumph Benny has experienced. As you walk through these chapters, you will see how God's plan and His hand were on Benny long before he was born. Then at each stage of Benny's life, the Lord positioned a caregiver to provide him with timely direction as He shaped him for a purpose he never could have imagined.

I believe you will find yourself in the space between the lines because Benny's struggles were not unlike struggles we all face. Yours may have a different name or take place in a different context, but your life's challenges are not as unique to you as you may believe. What is unique is God's plan for each of us. That is made clear in every story and teaching in this book.

Each chapter offers a fresh perspective for every season of your life,

building a foundation of hope for all your tomorrows. You can defy the odds simply because you carry the very presence of God into every situation you face and every ministry opportunity you encounter. *Defy the Odds* will show you how to maintain hope in all circumstances, as only a master communicator like Benny can do.

Through surrender and sacrifice, Benny has a way of turning the most unlikely circumstance into something amazing. Whether successfully navigating the scholarly world as a guest speaker on college campuses or growing a young church of 50 people into a church of more than 8,000, Benny has discovered a hidden pathway to success and victory. He is incredibly passionate about sharing that path with whoever is willing to sit and listen—or in this case, willing to sit and read.

I promise you this: Whatever situation you find yourself in today—rich or poor, highly successful or just trying to get on your feet—God has so much more for you. *Defy the Odds* will show you, step by step and story by story, how to walk in all He has for your life. Benny's story begins before he was even born, and you, too, will discover that your journey isn't just about finding your next step or making that next decision but also about learning that you have been a part of God's plan before you ever took a breath.

You, my friend, were made for more, and it's time to start defying the odds in your own life!

Jentezen Franklin,
senior pastor of Free Chapel and
New York Times bestselling author

INTRODUCTION

THE NEED FOR HOPE

If you had observed the first 16 years of my life, you might have found it hard to believe I'd become a preacher. You might have thought it more probable that I'd be thrown into prison before I hit 19, assuming I didn't end up dead long before then. You might have thought the odds were stacked against me so high that I'd never be able to overcome them, never have a family, never have much of anything to offer the world let alone to God. And you wouldn't have been alone in that assessment.

Judge Nelson Layne was a superior court judge from my hometown who knew me and my family well when I was growing up. After I'd been preaching for many years, Judge Lane attended a service one Sunday and stopped at the door to shake my hand as he left. He said, "I always knew you'd stand before me one day. I just didn't know it would be in a pulpit."

While no one else expected much for my future, the Lord had different plans. I just had to surrender my life to Him. I had to allow Him to deal with the odds stacked against me from birth. I had to let Him guide me through the years ahead, and I had to cling to the hope I found in Him and Him alone. And when I did? I learned I could trust Him with my future.

I believe the average person struggles with trusting God with all that

lies ahead in life. They may believe in God but struggle to believe there is *hope* in God, and that can make them fearful for their future. They're fearful because of concerns such as disease, terrorism, political unrest, and racial injustice, but they're also fearful because of challenging personal matters—perhaps financial insecurity, depression, addiction, a troubling or abusive relationship, or racial or other discrimination.

While all of these issues are legitimate concerns facing people in today's world, the odds of overcoming them only remain impossible in our own strength. When we determine in our hearts to keep our eyes on the Lord, the problems of this world seem much smaller. There is nothing our God cannot overcome, but we must believe in and hope in His power to overcome every obstacle.

A. W. Tozer once said of God, "All He has ever done for any of His children He will do for all of His children. The difference lies not with God but with us."¹ Tozer was right. God will do for His children now all that He has done for them in the past. The difference lies in us and the hope we have for the future because of His love, promises, and power.

Believing in God and trusting in God are not the same thing. Trust requires surrender. It requires you to lean into Him believing His promise to "uphold you with [His] righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10). My future changed when I chose to lean into God and trust Him with all of my tomorrows. Corrie ten Boom said it best: "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."² You can trust God with all your tomorrows too.

You will find a section in the back of the book, "Leaning In, Digging Deeper," for you to take notes as you read through each chapter. There is also space for you to write a specific prayer for how you would like to see God defy the odds in your life. Friend, I hope you lean in and dig deep because I believe God is going to do a great work in your life as you read!

As I share the story of how the Lord has defied the odds in my life—as well as in Rock Springs Church and the lives of others—my prayer is that you will be encouraged to believe this truth: No matter what circumstances present overwhelming odds in your life, you can always hope in God for your future. He can defy the odds!

VICTOR OVER VICTIM

The pregnant, 20-year-old girl with fiery red hair and simple, worn clothes climbed into the car with the man she was dating, but she had no idea where they were headed as they rode in silence, his face hard and cold. The day was bleak with gray skies that offered no warmth, and the mood in the car mirrored the weather.

They pulled into the parking lot at a doctor's office, but it didn't look like a place anyone would willingly go for medical care. The building was old, and the signage out front was unprofessional. She thought perhaps the man she was with needed medical attention, and she was worried as she asked questions on their walk inside. "Are we here for you? Do you need to see a doctor?"

The man looked at her with grave seriousness and said, "No. This is not about me. I've set up something for *you*. You're going to abort that baby. You don't need it."

Much to her shock, everything was ready for her to walk right in and abort her child. She was scared. No one was going to kill her baby! But how could she afford to manage on her own now that she knew he had no intention of helping her?

She immediately ran out the door. No matter what she had to do, she would raise her child—me. Yes, her reality lacked a clear plan,

steady resources, support, and education, but she was right not to take an innocent life even though the odds against her had just stacked a little higher. Mama wasn't a Christian, but I've always admired her for choosing me over an easier path.

You see, my mother had been battling the odds her entire life. She was raised in a dysfunctional home with abusive men, and she had only a sixth-grade education. Life was and had always been uphill for her. She could have gone through with the abortion that day and saved herself the trouble of struggling to make ends meet, but she didn't.

Here's the catcher: Not only was she only 20 years old and pregnant, but she already had a three-year-old daughter—my sister, Rhonda—whose father hadn't stuck around to fulfill his duties. And now she was pregnant again, and this man wasn't about to stick around either. *Two* little mouths to feed would certainly be more difficult, but all her choices in men had proven to be bad, and now the odds were stacked against her—again.

Overwhelming odds were stacked against me as well, obstacles littering the path my life was assumed to take. Yet God knew me and had a plan for my life long before I knew Him. I'm so glad He said in Jeremiah 1:5, "I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart" (NLT). I have always believed there may be accidental parents but no accidental children. God began defying the odds in my life long before I was born, and He continued defying them as they stacked against me higher and higher.

I was born on November 9, 1964. For the first 30 years of my life, I believed my biological father was Lee Tate. He and my mother married after I was born but soon parted ways after he adopted Rhonda and me. So it made sense that my name was Vincent Lynn *Tate*. I just didn't know Lee had adopted us. I also believed he died when I was very young. My mother wanted us to be like everyone else as much as possible and thought it better to let us believe our father was dead rather than us knowing the true character of our biological fathers.

Without Lee, Mama lived on her own with two small children. We had a tiny, one-bedroom apartment in McMinnville, Tennessee, and she worked two jobs—in a shirt factory by day and at a diner at night.

A friend of hers kept my sister while she was at work during the day and some nights, and she found someone else to care for me.

God Brings Jenny Travis

An old Pentecostal woman named Jenny Travis lived across the street from our apartment complex. Mamie, as I grew to call her, always wore her gray hair tied up in a bun and wore long dresses. I can't remember a time when she wasn't wearing long skirts, and she looked ready to head to church for Sunday service at any given moment. Her colored cardigans always matched her dress, and her large-framed glasses sat perched high on her nose. Mamie agreed to watch me while Mama was at work each day, but she had one issue to fix before I could stay with her. She said she couldn't pronounce the name Vincent, so she wanted to just call me Benny. From that moment on, I've been Benny Tate.

Mamie was a wonderful, godly woman the Lord used to defy the odds in my life. Later, she told me she would place her hands on me each day and pray, *God, You have a great plan for this baby. I want You to keep him safe. I know You're going to use this child in a very special way.* My mother wasn't a Christian and didn't know anything about praying, much less anything about praying blessings over her children, but God brought Mamie into my life and used her to pray blessings and favor over me. She prayed for provision over my life.

Mamie also told me all about Jesus long before I could walk or talk. Each day after my mother dropped me off, Mamie walked around the house showing me pictures of Jesus. Every room in her house had one on the wall. She would point and say, "Benny, that's Jesus." Then she'd point to another picture and say, "Benny, that's Jesus." And another. And another. Every single day she kept me, she pointed me to Jesus.

It came as no surprise to her or anyone else that my very first word was *Jesus*. You know, most children's first word is either *Mama* or *Dada*, but I had no father figure in my life, and my mother was working from morning to night. Mamie, being the godly woman she was, believed Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." She used every opportunity she had to train me up in the way I should go by pointing me to Jesus. She

didn't know the exact road I would travel in life, but she knew it would be a rough one.

I am so grateful that God positioned Mamie to be such an incredible influence on me during those formative years. She treated me just like her own. She even had photos of me hanging on the wall in her house along with photos of her own children and grandchildren.

I practically lived with her the first five years of my life, and to this day I attribute much of the provision and protection that have covered me throughout my life to those prayers Mamie was so faithful to pray. The odds may not have been in my favor, but I'm so glad the favor of God outweighs any odds that could ever be stacked against me.

It's funny how odds work—they're based on chance, likelihood, and probability. While odds might be useful in decision-making for gambling bets and buying and selling Wall Street stocks, they can't always be trusted to speak truth over someone's future. Odds are man-made, but there is nothing man-made about one's life.

When I was five years old, Mama came to Mamie's house to pick me up and said we were moving away. The only godly influence I had and all I knew to be home were taken from me that day, and my world was turned upside down. We packed our bags to move in with my mother's boyfriend, Bill—the very same man who had wanted to end my life before it began.

Ironically, we were moving to Shady Rest, Tennessee, but there was nothing restful or peaceful about living with Bill. Still, my mother chose to pursue a relationship with him because he was a man of some means, and she'd been struggling just to put food on the table for the three of us for a long time.

A Life of Abuse

Bill was a hard, vile man. He was abusive physically, mentally, verbally, and emotionally. Physically, he just didn't know when to quit with a belt; it wouldn't be anything for him to turn you over the bed and whip you so badly that you could hardly walk or sit down the next day.

One day when I was ten, Bill and I were out on his property, working on a fence. I hated helping him with chores—especially when we

were alone. I always managed to do something wrong no matter how hard I tried to follow every detail of his instructions, and he consistently punished me really good for whatever mistake I made. That day I wasn't digging post holes exactly the way he liked, and he started throwing rocks at me while calling me terrible names. He hurled a rock and then hurled an insult. The insults hurt worse than the rocks.

He constantly called me an ignorant bastard and told me I would never amount to anything. Bill had children of his own, and he also regularly reminded Rhonda and me that we weren't his.

I would say the verbal abuse caused more long-term damage than the physical abuse, and by the time I was ten, the effects of the abuse had become noticeable in my mental state. Mama loaded Rhonda, me, and Bill's children into the car for our yearly physicals, but I didn't know until later in life that Mama actually wanted me evaluated for any kind of mental disability. I was having such a hard time learning in school.

The doctor said I didn't have a learning disability and there was nothing wrong with my mental state. I did, however, have a man in my life who daily told me I was stupid and couldn't learn. Words like that thrown at me for seven years became truth in my mind and were reflected in my academics.

James 3:6 is so true: "The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell." The words we speak can be blessings or curses. I tell parents and guardians of children to speak positively to and about their children every day and to look for right behavior that can be rewarded over wrong behavior that can be reprimanded. For each one thing children do wrong, they do nine things worthy of praise. So the adults in their life should brag on them and tell them they're loved, valued, and talented every day.

The little saying "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" could not be more false. Words do hurt. They can build up or tear down. That means our words have so much power in them that they should always inspire and lift others so they can see who they are in God's eyes. I wasn't accustomed to such positive

language, and very few inspiring and uplifting conversations occurred in my home.

Bill ran a package store, and Mama worked long, hard hours doing all of the manual labor. By contrast, Bill was so lazy. He sat around the store or talked with customers while my mother unloaded the heavy boxes, restocked the shelves, and iced down the coolers. When she was finished for the day, she was exhausted, but when she came home, she made sure we were fed, bathed, and in bed.

Bill wouldn't get home until much later because he stayed out drinking after the store was closed. He was a heavy drinker, and our environment was filled with the fear of his abuse. He took out his violent anger on Mama the most, and he would stumble into the house drunk as could be and start an argument with her over the tiniest thing. Then he would beat her so badly that the police would come and arrest him. Even though I wasn't a Christian, I'd lie in bed anxiously praying, *God, please don't let Bill beat Mama tonight!* Even I knew just enough to call on Him when we had big trouble.

Some nights Bill went after me. One night when I was around nine, he came home drunk and heard some of our cows lowing out in the pasture. I heard him stumbling down the hallway toward my room as he hollered, "You little bastard, you didn't feed them cows enough hay when you got home from school. That's why they're making all that noise." Then he burst into my room and yelled, "Get up out of that bed and go feed those cows more hay right now!"

I was just a little boy, scared to death to go out to the dirty, old barn in the dark by myself. I wish I could say that was the only night something like that happened, but that was the normal way of life for me and my family. That's just the kind of man Bill was.

Throughout the seven years we spent with Bill, we probably left at least 20 times. Mama would come home in a panic and tell Rhonda and me to grab whatever we could and pack our clothes because we were leaving. Some nights she ran into our rooms while we were sleeping and shook us awake, saying, "Get up! We gotta get outta here before Bill gets home!" It took us less than five minutes to stuff our suitcases and get out of there.

Then we'd hide out somewhere because we knew Bill would be looking for us, calling everyone Mama knew. Then when he found out where we were, he'd show up to convince Mama to come back.

We did go back. *We always* went back.

Years later, when I was grown, my mother shared more about her experiences with Bill, things I'd never known. I'd seen the physical bruises, but I hadn't always realized her emotional heartache. She said before Bill began beating her, he would say things like, "I'm going to mess up your face so bad no other man will want to look at you." Hearing such terrible details broke my heart all over again.

I asked Mama why we went back so many times. She explained, "Benny, I had only a sixth-grade education, and I didn't have any way to provide for you and your sister. So I worked in the package store for Bill just to provide a roof over your heads and food on the table for y'all. I felt like I didn't have any other choice."

We were housed, fed, and clothed, but it wasn't a happy home, and the long-term effects of living with Bill followed me well into adulthood.



If anyone had grounds for explaining away bad behavior and poor decision-making, it was me. I could have easily chosen the wrong path in my late teens and early twenties and blamed every bad choice on my experiences with Bill. They could have become my go-to excuses for a wild, rebellious lifestyle.

Each day, people all across this country sit in counseling sessions explaining how their behaviors are simply a product of their upbringing. Parents who yelled at or hit them are the cause of their anger and self-control issues. Alcoholics in the home are to blame for their issues with substance abuse. Their broken homes are responsible for their infidelity. And strict, religious parents are the root cause of their rebellious tendencies.

People use these types of excuses themselves or allow other people to speak them into their lives. Whatever the case may be, they're

stuck in these patterns of behavior and thinking because they can't get past the past. They've allowed themselves to become victims of their circumstances.

I'm certainly not discounting the lifelong effects traumatic experiences can have on an individual, but as someone who is all too familiar with childhood trauma, I am here to say you do not have to be defined by what happened to you. You do not have to live your life as a product of the environment you were raised in or the horrible experiences you endured in your past. You see, while you can't determine what happens *to* you, you can determine what happens *in* you. You alone decide how you respond to all situations.

God defied the odds in my life when, as a young adult, I let Him grow me beyond what I thought I could become. At first, I listed all the reasons He couldn't use me, but I was building walls and limiting the space where He wanted to work in my life. Not until I traded in my excuses for trust did God begin moving and working in ways I never thought possible. He used my past to create a path for my future.

God will begin defying the odds in your life when you refuse to let your circumstances become excuses and realize the power you have over your own thoughts and behaviors. Then He can begin a transformation in you that you could never have imagined.

In Romans 12:2, Paul advises Christians, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Letting your past experiences dictate your plans and potential is the perfect example of conforming to the patterns of this world. While you may create a resumé that disqualifies you from a variety of opportunities, renewing your mind with God's truth allows Him to use your experiences to create a resumé that qualifies you for His kingdom work.

Often, the greatest hurts, the hardest hits, and the most painful circumstances are what allow God to deliver the greatest blessings. I have often said that our strongest passions come out of our deepest hurts. God wants to work through your circumstances and use your experiences to grow you and develop your testimony. When you allow Him

to take what the Enemy meant for evil and turn it into a blessing, He gets all the glory. Only then do you become a victor instead of a victim.

While my childhood experiences were often painful to remember, I knew healing would come only once I let God have every bit of the hurt. I also had to trust Him to use those painful experiences for my good and His glory. And not only did He bring healing to my broken heart but He created in me a passion for providing children with positive, encouraging, and Christian environments.

God chose to defy the odds against my healing through the vision of Rock Springs Christian Academy and the Rock Springs Recreational Complex. Today our original campus houses a private, Christian school and learning center that provides a godly educational environment for children beginning at six weeks of age. The children enrolled in our school receive a strong education built on the foundation of God's Word, and families in our area participate in community athletic programs at our recreational facility, led by godly individuals who encourage children in their talents and abilities.

If I had chosen to hold on to the hurt from my past, I would have missed out on the vision for the future of so many others in and around Rock Springs. I have never once regretted letting go of my hurt and trusting God to heal. He has always done more with my pain than I ever dreamed possible. He has always defied the odds.

God wants to do the very same thing in your life through your most painful circumstances. He wants to take the experience with abuse and use it to help others heal. He wants to take the hurt of a broken home and provide counseling for couples facing divorce. He wants to take the neglect from an alcoholic parent and use it to serve in a 12-step program. Whatever your hurt may be, God will use it to help others and further His kingdom.

He will not reach out and take the hurt from you, though. He's waiting for you to lay it all down at His feet and trust Him to do a mighty work. You must be willing to give it all to Him before He will use it for good.

I'm not foolish enough to think this is an easy task. I know from experience that it's incredibly difficult to let go of deep hurt and trust

that healing will come. Therefore, I want to provide you with a few application points to help you take the necessary steps to move from victim to victor.

Realize the Responsibility You Have

Maintaining a victim mentality requires keeping a thought pattern that says you're helpless and incapable of changing your circumstances. But if you want to see God defy the odds in your life through your hurt, you must realize the responsibility you have over the choices you make each day.

You don't have to live your life believing you're weak or incapable of overcoming your past. Freedom from all sin and hurt can be found in Jesus, but it's up to you to receive it. First John 4:4 says, "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." That means you do not have to allow the circumstances of this life to overwhelm or limit you. The choice is yours to pursue a future not determined by your past. And with the Holy Spirit living inside of you, the power to overcome any obstacle is already present.

Choosing to believe there is purpose in your pain is incredibly difficult; it's so easy to question why God would allow such terrible things to happen to you. But you will never move to a place of permanent healing unless you choose to believe that better days lie ahead. You must choose to deny your feelings and trust the Father every day. You must choose to believe that affliction builds character and prepares you for a greater purpose. Every inch of your worldly heart will tell you that your circumstances define who you are, but you must daily choose to believe that you are not defined by your circumstances but by how you respond to them.

You must first realize the incredible power that lies within the choices you make. I'm not talking about the major life choices that come over the course of your life but the small choices you make every day. Never underestimate the power of small choices, because small choices lead to great choices. It may be a trial by the mile, but it's a cinch by the inch. Overcoming life's greatest hurts doesn't happen overnight, but little by little you can choose to allow your greatest tragedies to build your best testimony.

Choosing to move past your circumstances into a place of healing can be the most difficult step. Yet you're the only one who can choose to move forward without your past hurts dictating your life. You are in control of your own thoughts and actions. You are the one responsible for deciding how your past impacts your future.

Give Your Hurt to God

Whether you've suffered through terrible experiences in your past or you're currently enduring a difficult situation, you can have victory through relying completely on God. Beginning to move forward is a huge step that should be celebrated, but you must not stop there. Making better choices is just the first step in your healing. To truly witness God defying the odds in your life, you must give your hurt to Him, the healer.

God is capable of bringing healing to any heart no matter how severe the trauma. No heart is so shattered that He can't bring restoration. Anything placed in His hand—no matter the damage—can be made better. But if you don't surrender your hurt to God, it will remain a memory and won't become a ministry. God has a purpose for every heartache you experience, and surrendering everything to Him paves the way for kingdom work.

When you give your hurt to God, you can exchange it for His truth. You can exchange bitterness for forgiveness. You can replace the lies of the Enemy with the truth of your Savior. Matthew 11:28 shows God's heart for those who are hurting. Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." God wants you to take everything to Him because He cares for you and wants you to experience the peace only He can provide.

Giving your past to God allows you to receive more than you ever lost. While He restores what was broken through your healing, He also brings redemption by making your circumstances better than they were. God will always give you more when you trust Him with your hurt.

Let God Use Your Hurt

God has allowed painful circumstances in your life for a reason: He wants to use all you have experienced to grow your faith and impact

others for eternity. Do not despise what you have experienced or what you're currently going through, because God has great plans to use every hurt to bring people to Himself. He wants to use your testimony to help others walk through their darkest times.

In Mark 5, Jesus heals a man who is possessed with a demon. The man pleads to go with Him, but Jesus doesn't allow him to do that. In verse 19, He tells the man, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." Being with Jesus was the man's only focus, but Jesus knew his testimony would cause others to believe, that it would change the lives of those around him.

The same is true for your testimony. Let God use it to impact those around you for eternity. When people know you have overcome circumstances similar to their own, they connect with you and grow more willing to let you closer to their hurt. In that place of empathy, then, you can point them to Christ, and they can begin healing as well. God wants to use you. He wants you to be His hands and feet to lead others and be His voice of encouragement that offers hope in dark times. He will create a ministry out of your misery. He will give purpose to your pain.

The author of Psalm 119:71 says, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes." Affliction brings us closer to God and strengthens our faith. Let God have your past, and you will learn all that He has planned for your future.

God will defy the odds in your life when you allow Him to move you from a victim to a victor. And you must *allow* Him to move; He will not force you to let go of your hurt in order to experience healing. While it may be the most difficult step to take, you can overcome any hardship when you realize the power of your choices, let God have your hurt, and trust Him to purpose your pain for His kingdom.

Don't let your hurt keep you in bondage. God has so much more for your life—the life of a victor!