



IT'S YOUR TIME

Activate Your Faith, **Achieve** Your Dreams, and **Increase** in God's Favor

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DEDICATION

To Victoria, my wife and best friend.

I knew it was my time for blessing when we first met. It's hard to believe we've been together so long already, each day with you is a gift. I cherish your love, your kindness, and your companionship. You are the love of my life.

To Jonathan and Alexandra, our children.

It is difficult to find the words that truly describe how much I love you both. You inspire me to be a better dad and a better person. Thank you for making us a family that reflects God's goodness and love.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Probably more than any of my other books, I felt like a man on a mission with this one. So many people seemed to be dealing with extra burdens brought on by the economic downturn even as they faced the usual challenges to their families, their careers, their relationships, and their health. I wanted to get this book out there to give them hope and inspiration. And I felt it important to remind everyone that they are never alone, not as long as they have faith.

I was not alone in putting this book together, either, of course. As always, I had guidance from God, followed at a respectful distance by the publishing professionals at Simon & Schuster, particularly Carolyn Reidy, Dominick Anfuso, and Martha Levin.

I also want to thank my incredible literary agents, Jan Miller and Shannon Marven, and the entire team at Dupree Miller & Associates, who supported me as always with their energy and expertise.

Special thanks as well to my collaborator Wes Smith, whose good humor, great work ethic, and wordsmith skills made the writing process smooth, fast, and fun too.

This book shares with you stories from my life, from my upbringing in the church, and from friends and well-wishers across the country and around the world. I appreciate all their suggestions and their assistance while acknowledging their contributions.

Some of those mentioned in the book are people I don't

know personally, but their shining examples are inspiring to us all. I give honor to those to whom honor is due. I've spent much of my life listening to sermons and stories from church pews or in production studios. I've heard thousands of presentations, and I can't always remember the exact source of a story or lesson. Thanks to all of those who have touched my life with theirs. My intention in these pages is to pass on the blessing, and to God be the glory.

I am grateful, as always, for our staff and the entire Lakewood Church family who faithfully and selflessly serve God's house and share His joy and love with us each and every week. And thanks also to our friends and partners who attend our services or follow them on television, the internet, podcasts, or radio broadcasts from across the United States and throughout the world. You not only support us but encourage us with your stories and your examples.

Finally, I thank my mother, Dodie Osteen. My mom is the greatest. She believes in what we are doing and her prayers give me the strength to always keep building upon my father's work. This book is just one more step. I promise you, there are many more to come.

INTRODUCTION

My desire is to speak faith into the lives of others, encouraging them when they are discouraged, calling forth the seeds of greatness God planted within, assuring them that their best days are ahead. This book is filled with hopeful messages intended to do just that. My prayer is to inspire you and to expand your vision so you might find the courage to overcome any obstacles and accomplish your dreams. God has great things in store for you. A new season is coming. I hope my words ignite your faith and increase God's favor in your life.

Psalm 84:11 says no good thing will God withhold to those who walk uprightly. When you have a heart to please God and when you live a life of excellence and integrity—being your best each day, living with purpose and passion and a desire to help others—God's promise is that He will not withhold what you need to become you or what He has created you to be.

God will not withhold wisdom, creativity, good breaks, the right connections, strength, joy, or victory.

You may have been through challenging times. The economic downturn has affected people of all ages and incomes. Millions have lost their jobs. Millions more have seen their savings depleted. Many have lost their homes. Relationships have been strained. We've all been tested.

History has shown that economic depressions and recessions surely do cause suffering, but they also serve as catalysts for inspiration, creativity, and new levels of achievement that ultimately make for better lives and a

better world. Many of the world's strongest corporations and family businesses were forged in times such as these. Some doors have closed, but others will open.

To give you strength and to fortify your faith, I've put this book together in five parts. Each is designed to build on the other. The goal is not simply to inspire and motivate you, but also to help you see that God's plan is at work in your life. He walks with you. You may not perceive a way out right now, but He does. You may not feel that you have all that it will take to emerge stronger, but He does. With God in your heart, you will persevere and prevail.

The book begins with a section entitled "It's Time to Believe," because tough times require strong faith, because this too will pass, because big problems precede bigger things to come, because every disappointment gives us fresh opportunities, and because each season of scarcity gives way to new seasons of increase.

It's time to reaffirm your belief that you are one of our Father's children. You are made in His image and He loves you.

"It's Time for Favor" is the section about faith fortification. Here you can bulk up with encouragement to pray bold prayers, to seek thriving over surviving, to choose faith over fear, to expect favor in your future, and to speak faith-filled words.

In "It's Time for Restoration," I offer you the tools of forgiveness and renewal. These tools include God's ability to turn back time, your power to come back from setbacks and to bounce back from disappointments. Restoration comes too from living a resurrected life and from holding

on to your promise of a better day.

"It's Time to Trust" builds your resolve by reminding you of those things you can trust: that all things work together for good, that God remembers you, that you can gain strength through adversity, and that there will come an anointing of ease.

Finally, I've concluded the book with "It's Time to Stretch." We stretch to grow. We stretch to build strength. We stretch to reach beyond previous levels of accomplishment and fulfillment. The final chapters will motivate you to step into your divine destiny, to stay open for something new, to find your place of blessing, and to relieve for a supernatural year.

As you read these chapters, keep your heart pure, strive for excellence, and prepare yourself, because it's your time for God's goodness, favor, and restoration. It's your time to walk in the fullness of His blessing.

— *Joel Osteen*

PART ONE

IT'S TIME TO BELIEVE

CHAPTER 1

You're Closer Than You Think!

While on vacation in Colorado, I woke up early for a hike. The three-mile trail ran to the peak of Beaver Creek Mountain. At the base a sign said it should take about three hours to reach the top.

Looking up to my destination, I was intimidated. The trail was extremely steep. The altitude at the base was 8,000 feet above sea level. The peak stood at more than 11,000 feet.

Just walking up the first set of stairs, I began breathing heavier than normal. I had to remind myself to take it easy. At home in Houston, I run several miles a few times a week and play a lot of basketball. But the elevation there is only fifty feet above sea level. The thinner air in the Colorado mountains had me doubting whether I could make it to the top.

I started out with just my cell phone and a bottle of water. Determined, I set a pretty good pace. The first fifteen minutes seemed fairly easy. The next fifteen minutes were increasingly difficult. I felt as though I were carrying an extra load. I had to stop every so often to catch my breath.

About forty-five minutes into my hike, the trail got extremely steep—almost like I was climbing straight up. My pathway snaked skyward through thick stands of aspen and ponderosa pine. The view was both beautiful and daunting. Despite the fact I am in shape from running

and playing basketball, my legs were burning and my chest was pounding.

As I climbed over a big ridge, I had to stop for air. Sweat was pouring off my body. I thought: If there's another two hours like this, I don't know if I can make it.

Up to that point, I had not seen anyone else on the path. Suddenly an older gentleman heading down the mountain came around a curve. He wore a T-shirt, shorts, and hiking shoes and carried a walking stick. He seemed cool and calm. And he read me pretty well.

As we passed, he said something that changed my whole perspective. He smiled kindly and said in a calm voice: "You are closer than you think."

Hearing those words, I felt rejuvenated, as if he'd breathed new life into my lungs. Energy surged through my body. My legs grew stronger. I caught a second wind. From that point forward, with every stride, I repeated those words of encouragement: "I will make it. I'm closer than I think."

Though the climb was difficult, though my muscles and lungs were burning, I kept saying, "I'm almost to the top. I know I can make it." And sure enough, just ten minutes later, I clambered over these big boulders and beheld a beautiful sight: the summit.

According to the sign at the base, it was supposed to be a three-hour hike. But I'd made it in just under an hour! I was much closer than I'd thought when I passed that gentleman on the trail. Yet, without his encouraging words, I might have turned around. I might have talked

myself out of continuing because I thought I had two more hours to go.

Until I met the older hiker, my perspective was limited and so was my thinking. I knew only what I'd read on the sign. He knew I was just ten minutes from my goal, and when he told me I was closer, he gave me a fresh perspective. He knew more about the trail ahead of me, just as God knows more about what lies ahead for you.

I don't know where you are headed, what your dreams are, or how many obstacles you have to overcome. But I encourage you to let these words reach deep down into your spirit. Receive them by faith.

You are closer than you think.

A global recession has forced many to postpone their dreams and cancel their plans. You may have lost your job. You may have lost your savings, maybe even your home. It could be that you have health concerns or relationship problems. Maybe you are frustrated because it's taking so long to get where you want to be in your life. Yet now is not the time to talk yourself out of your goals and dreams. Now is not the time to get discouraged. You may think, as I did climbing that trail, that you're not even halfway there. You may feel you have so far to go. But the truth is, you don't know. Your dream may just be up around the corner. You may think it will take mother two years. But if you stay in faith, who knows? It may just be two more months. You are closer than you think. I believe it's your time.

Amber Corson was a stay-at-home mom with three young children. When her husband was laid off from his Florida

construction job as the economy soured, Amber had to take a night-shift job to help support the family.

She'd been working that late shift for four weeks. One night she was driving home, tired, scared, missing her kids, and worried about their future. Amber felt like God had bigger plans for her family than to struggle. She prayed on that drive home. "God, please tell me what I can do to get my family through this."

She said His response came to her "like a breath."

"I gave you a gift. Go plant gardens. Do your heart's work."

Amber had a degree in horticulture that she'd never used. She was so talented she'd been certified as a master gardener. She had a natural talent for making things grow. That night, she told her husband what God had put in her heart. She prayed on it. In the next few weeks, she said, things "just fell into place like it had been planned for me all along."

She called her landscaping business Eden Paradise Gardens. It grew quickly and flourished beyond anything she had dreamed. It her time!

God wants to breathe new life into your dreams. He wants to breathe new hope into your heart. You may be about to give up on a marriage, on a troubled child, on a lifelong goal. But God wants you to hold on. He says that if you'll get your second wind, if you'll put on a new attitude and press forward like you're headed down the final stretch, you'll see Him begin to do amazing things.

Tune out the negative messages. Quit telling yourself: I'm never landing back on my feet financially. I'm never breaking this addiction. I'm never landing a better job.

Instead, your declarations should be: "I am closer than I think. I can raise this child. I can overcome this sickness. I can make this business work. I know I can find a new job.

Psalm 30:5 says that weeping may endure for a night, but I know joy is coming in the morning. You must get up each day knowing this could be the day you get the break you need. This could be the day you see your health turn around. This could be the day your child comes back home. This could be the day you meet the man or woman of your dreams.

Zechariah 9:12 says that we should be prisoners of hope. It's easy to give up. It's easy to get discouraged. But God wants us to be so full of hope, so full of expectancy, that we just can't help believing for the best.

When you're a prisoner of something, it's like you're chained to it. You can't get away from it. I know people who are prisoners of fear, prisoners of worry, prisoners of doubt. You've heard them. "Nothing good ever happens to me." "It's never changing, Joel. It's just been too long."

They are chained to despair and discouragement. Break those chains. Become a prisoner of hope. No matter how long it takes, no matter how impossible it looks, your attitude should be: "I just can't help it. I know it will work out. I know I will overcome. It may be taking a long time, but I know this too shall pass. It may be difficult, but I know that means I'm close to my victory."

Today is the day!

Down in the Florida Keys, there was a treasure hunter whose motto was "Today's the day." Every day for sixteen years, Mel Fisher sent his divers out with those encouraging words to find a Spanish ship that sank off the Keys in 1622. He often had to pay his men in promises while dodging bill collectors. He and his family lived on a leaky houseboat for years. One of his sons and a daughter-in-law were lost at sea as they searched for the treasure.

Still, Fisher never gave up. He refused to abandon his dream or to give in to critics and doubters. He held on by declaring that each day would be the day. Then, in 1985, Mel's divers found the "mother lode" of gold and silver and jewelry from the wreckage of me Spanish galleon. Nearly thirty years later, divers were still bringing up treasure from that site.

Is today the day for you to accomplish your goal, to land your dream job, to find love, to restore your health? You are closer than you think to a better life, a richer relationship, a healthier body.

Rewards await you if you stay steadfast in your faith.

Don't let doubters ruin your optimistic spirit. If somebody says to you, "What is it with you? What makes you think everything will work out? Do you really believe you will always succeed?"

Just tell the doubters: "I don't think it will happen. I know it will happen! I'm a prisoner of hope. I can't get away from it. I just can't make myself get negative. I just can't

make myself complain. Hope reeds my faith and lifts my spirits."

The doubters may say, "Well, I don't know why. I saw the medical report. It doesn't look good for you."

"Yes, but I have another report," you can tell them. "It says God is restoring health back unto me."

"Well, I saw your child. I don't think he'll ever do what's right."

"Really? I have another report. It says as for me and my house, will serve the Lord."

You may not see any of this in the natural. It may not look like it will come to pass. But that's okay. The Scripture says, "We walk - faith and not by sight." That means we don't have to see it to relieve it. It's just the opposite. If we believe it, then we see it.

Take your dreams and the promises God has put in your heart and every day declare that they will come to pass. Just say something like, "Father, I want to thank You that my payday is coming.

You said no good thing will You withhold, because I walk uprightly. And I believe even right now You are arranging things in my favor."

Are you a prisoner of fear? Worry? Self-pity? Negativity?

Break those chains and become a prisoner of hope. Expect God's favor. Believe that He is working in your life, even right now.

God has put dreams and desires in your heart.

We all have goals we want to accomplish and situations we believe we will turn around. But often when it's taking a long time and things are not working out, it's easy to lose our enthusiasm. That's when the negative thoughts come, saying:

It never will change.

You never will get well.

You never will climb out of debt.

That child never will straighten up.

If you listen to those negative thoughts, you will likely become discouraged and give up on your dreams. Many times we miss out on God's best because we give up too soon. We don't realize how close we are to victory.

Hold on to your faith. Another few days of believing, another few weeks of doing the right thing, or another few months of staying in faith and you will see that promise come to pass.

Right now, you are so close to seeing that situation turn around. That answer you've been praying about is just right around the corner. You can't afford to get discouraged. You can't afford to give up now.

That's what the scripture says in Hebrews 10:35. It tells us not to cast away our confidence, for it will be richly rewarded. That's saying if we will stay in faith, if we will

keep believing, keep hoping, keep doing the right thing, God promises there will be a reward.

One translation says, in effect, "Don't get discouraged. Payday is coming."

When you're tempted to get down and things are not going your way, you need to keep telling yourself, "This may be hard. It may be taking a long time. But I know God is a faithful God. And I will believe, knowing that my payday is on its way."

Whenever life grows difficult and the pressure is turned up, that's a sign that your time is near. When lies bombard your mind, when you are most tempted to get discouraged, and when you feel like throwing in the towel—that's not the time to give up. That's not the time to back down. That's the time to dig in your heels. Put on a new attitude. You are closer than you think.

You may have had a lot of things come against you. I know sometimes it seems like the more you pray, the worse it gets. You do the right thing but get the wrong results. Maybe you're treating somebody kindly and respectfully, but they're being unkind and discourteous to you. The easy thing would be to say, "Forget it. I don't have to put up with this." "This marriage never will work." "I'll never be able to raise this child." "I don't like this job."

Instead of getting discouraged, instead of going around all sour, you need to have the attitude to say, "I've come too far to stop now. I've been through too much to back down. I realize the pressure has been turned up because I'm about to give birth to my dreams!"

A couple I know told me their son was on the wrong path, running with the wrong crowd. He had addictions he needed to overcome. They were doing everything they could to help him. They found him a new place to live away from his drug-using friends. They found a support group for him. They were praying more than ever. But they said, "Joel, it seems like the more we pray, the more we try, the more we believe, the worse he gets."

They were so concerned. But I told them what I'm telling you. The reason the pressure has been turned up is because you're close to your victory. The enemy would not be fighting so hard if he didn't know he was about to lose his grip on this child.

If you will keep believing, keep hoping, keep doing the right thing, and if you stay strong for that final push, you will see the situation turn around. You'll see that promise come to pass.

It's just like a woman having a baby. The first month or two is not that difficult. No big deal. The mother-to-be looks and feels much the same. But then in a few months she gains the baby's weight. She carries around the extra pounds. Her feet may swell up. Her back may hurt. She may have some nausea, some morning sickness.

By the eighth or the ninth month, husbands, you know you'd better give that woman some space. Don't mess with Momma. Don't backtalk her. Just do what she says and nobody will get hurt. She gets more and more uncomfortable. But then when her water breaks and she goes into labor, all those other challenges seem insignificant compared to the difficulty of giving birth.

When Victoria was in labor with our first child, our son Jonathan, she was holding on to my arm so tight. When she had a contraction, she squeezed my arm. Victoria would scream, and then I would scream.

I wanted to mention to her that she was hurting me, but I feared for my life!

Truth be told, if a woman in labor had a choice, she'd probably say, "I don't want to do this anymore. It's too difficult. I can't stand it."

But she doesn't have a choice. The doctor, the nurse, the husband keep saying, "Push! Push! Push!" Before long, she pushes that baby out. And in a few minutes she forgets all about the pain because she's holding the promise. She's holding that little child.

It's the same principle in dealing with daily life. The greatest difficulty always comes right before the birth of a dream. Before you see a new level of God's favor, don't be surprised if things come against you to try to discourage you. People may try to talk you out of your dreams, to convince you to just settle where you are.

You may not realize that you are "in labor" right now. You are about to give birth to what God has put in your heart. That's why it's such a struggle. You're in that final push. Maybe at work you're doing the right thing, going the extra mile, but you were passed over for a promotion. It wasn't fair. What was that disappointment? A labor pain. So just push through it.

Maybe you wanted to create that new business, but your

partner backed out. The financing didn't come through. What was that disappointment? Another labor pain. If you'll keep pushing, keep believing, keep hoping, before long—like that woman in labor—you will push that promise out.

You may feel as though you've never had such a struggle in your finances, your health, or your relationships. You could say, "Joel, this is the greatest attack that I've ever faced."

Instead of getting down and thinking, Poor old me, learn to turn it around and say, "Yes, this is the greatest attack that I've ever been through, but I know it means that I'm headed for the greatest victory that I've ever seen." Remember, it's always darkest right before the dawn.

You're about to give birth to that promise.

I read about an experiment that attempted to measure the power of attitude in rats. The researchers wanted to see how the rats' attitudes affected their will to live. They put one rat in a large tub of water with high sides so it could not get out. Then they put the tub in a dark room. They timed how long the rat would keep swimming before it gave up. The rat lasted a little over three minutes.

Then the researchers put another rat in the same tub, but this time they allowed a bright ray of light to shine into the room. That rat swam more than thirty-six hours, seven hundred times longer than the rat with no light.

Why was that? The rat with no light had no hope. When he looked ahead he saw only darkness. There wasn't any reason to keep swimming. That's what happens when we

don't expect God's favor. We lose faith that we can overcome our obstacles. We don't believe that God is in control, so we lose our passion, we lose our enthusiasm.

That's why it's so important—especially in times of difficulty—to keep reminding yourself: "The Creator of the universe is directing my steps. He has me in the palm of His hands. And even though this is difficult, I know it's just a matter of time before it turns around. I know my payday is coming."

You may be about to give up on a dream. You think it's been too long. It never will change. It will never work out. But you must get your fire back. Fan that flame. Keep that dream alive. Even though it's taking a long time, the good news is, God still has a way to bring it to pass.

Victoria once lost a ring her mother had given her. It was a diamond band that had been in the family for several generations. Although it was valuable, it held even more sentimental value to us. Sometimes when we'd go on trips Victoria hid the ring in our house. We thought maybe she'd hidden it and forgotten the hiding place. So we looked and looked and looked in every drawer, in every cabinet. I looked behind couches and between cushions. I found things that I hadn't seen in ten years. But never Victoria's ring.

After a couple of months of looking on and off, I finally gave up. That ring was nowhere to be found. But every few days I heard Victoria pray: "Father, thank you that I will find my ring. Thank you, for You are leading me and guiding me."

I didn't say anything out loud, but inside, being the great

man of faith that I am, I thought, Victoria, you are wasting your time. We have turned this house upside down. That ring is just not here.

It's funny, but when my mother-in-law noticed that Victoria was not wearing the ring and asked her about it, Victoria said, "Oh, Mom. I've put it away in a really safe place."

I thought, Yeah, so safe that we can't even find it. As the months went by, I probably heard Victoria say she would find that ring five hundred times. I never once heard her give up and say, "It's gone. I've lost it. What will I do?" She had an optimistic attitude, "I'm closer than I think. I know any day that ring will show up."

Three years later we were driving home from Victoria, Texas, two hours south of Houston. We had just ministered for my brother-in-law Jim and my sister Tamara. Driving on the freeway, 11:00 at night, Victoria said, "Joel, you'd better slow down. You will get a ticket."

"I won't get a ticket," I said. "We're only going 70. The speed limit is 65."

"No, the speed limit is 60 at night," Victoria said.

"No, it's 65"

"Joel, I'm telling you, you need to slow down."

I laughed. "Victoria, I have the favor of God."

God has such a sense of humor. Just about that time, I looked in my rearview mirror and saw the flashing lights.

Then I looked at Victoria and said, "You made me get this ticket."

The officer was a real nice, polite young man. He said, "I need to see your driver's license." I gave it to him.

"Are you the minister?" he asked.

"I am."

"Did you speak at Faith Family Church tonight?" "I did. In fact, that's my sister's church."

"I know," the officer said. "My father was there. He's the head usher."

"Oh, man. That's great. He was so nice to me."

The officer laughed, but he still asked for my insurance card.

And so Victoria dug deeper and deeper in the glove compartment. It was dark and we were a little uptight about being pulled over. She found every card except the right one.

Finally, with the officer waiting, Victoria took all the contents "in of the glove compartment in search of the insurance card. She reached way back inside as far as she could. There, deep down in the darkness, she felt something with a hard, sharp edge. She dug a little deeper, grabbed it, and pulled it out.

Lo and behold, it was her missing ring. She was so excited. She forgot all about looking for the insurance

card!

I thought: Girl, you're rejoicing, and I'm about to go to jail. "Victoria, that's great. But we still have to find the insurance card," I reminded her.

She finally dug out that, too, and gave it to the officer.

"Joel, I'll let you go," he said. "But first, I have one request. When I come visit your church, will you save me a seat?"

"Officer," I told him, "I'll save you a whole section."

I drove off that night thinking: God, You are so good. I didn't get a ticket and Victoria found her ring.

God works in mysterious ways. I thought later that He caused Victoria to find her ring at my expense. But the truth is, Victoria stayed in faith. She had that attitude, "I'm closer than I think."

A young couple from our church told me about the challenges they had while trying to sell their house. They had only a few prospects in the first few weeks. They weren't having much luck.

The market was tough. Realtors told them it may take six months, a year, maybe even two years to sell. But this couple had an attitude of faith. They were prisoners of hope. And even though it didn't look good, they kept reminding themselves, "We are closer than we think. It could happen any day."

This one couple came back to look at the house a second time. They wanted to spend a couple of hours really

studying it to see if it was right for their family. The owners were okay with that. But they debated whether they should take down their personal pictures of themselves and their children, just so they could remain more private. After they thought about it, they felt good about leaving those pictures where they were.

The potential buyers came to look at the house, and the owners left so they could take their time. A few hours later, they received a call from the real estate agent saying the couple definitely wanted to purchase the house. The buyers told my friends that they'd been torn between their house and another one. But during that last visit, they'd seen something that convinced them to buy my friends' house.

"We saw a picture of you and your pastor, and we thought: 'These people love God. They go to Lakewood. This must be the house for us!'"

My friend told me: "Joel, you helped me sell my house."

I told him that was great: "Now let's talk about my commission."

Know that God has all kinds of ways to bring your dreams to pass.

He can cause a simple photograph to be in the right place at the right time to help you. He can cause a police officer to pull you over in the middle of the night and help you find something you've been looking for, God is in complete control. So be a prisoner of hope. Get up each day expecting His favor.

When negative thoughts come and your burden seems so heavy you feel discouraged, just keep telling yourself: "I'm closer than I think. Right now the Creator of the universe is lining up things in my favor: the right people, the right breaks, the right opportunities."

Maybe you have been through tough times. Resolve to move forward. Don't stay there. Put on a new attitude. Disappointments come and go, but God's favor is for a lifetime.

A friend told me a story about an executive who had an interesting print hanging in his office. It depicted a large rowboat stranded on a beach. Two oars rested gently in the sand, with the ocean at low tide twenty or thirty feet behind it. The boat looked too heavy to drag, too big to move. It was just stuck there in the sand.

The picture wasn't a thing of beauty. It wasn't inspiring. In fact, it was depressing. Here was this boat created for the water, a very nice boat made to dance on top of the ocean waves, stuck in the sand.

But at the very bottom of the picture was a small caption that gave meaning to the otherwise unremarkable picture. It read: "The tide always comes back."

With that simple caption, the print took on new meaning: When the tide returned, that stranded boat once again would find its purpose. It would return to the place it was meant to be.

My friend told me that the executive once had gone through a great disappointment. He didn't think he would ever be happy again. Then he saw the painting at a small

antique store and bought it for just a few dollars. Every time he looked at it, he said to himself: "The tide is coming back."

That print spoke faith into his heart. The caption gave him hope that things would change in his favor.

You may find yourself in a similar situation. Stuck. Stranded. Robbed of your purpose. Things may not be going your way. You've lost your energy and enthusiasm.

Heed those words: "The tide is coming back."

Hear my message: God is breathing new life into your dreams.

You will feel the wind of His spirit lift your sails once again. You are not meant to simply endure life. Barely getting by is not acceptable. You were meant to dance on top of the waves.

Tell yourself each and every day: "The tide is coming back. Today is the day! I am closer than I think!"

Remember that it is always darkest before the dawn. More challenges mean you're closer to your victory. Don't give up on your dream. Don't give up your relationship because the waters get rough. Don't give up on living a healthy life because illness brings you down. Times may grow tough, but remember there are rewards for staying in faith.

God promises your payday is on its way. If you'll learn to be a prisoner of hope and get up every day expecting God's favor, you'll see God do amazing things. You'll

overcome every obstacle. You'll defeat every enemy. And I believe and declare you'll see every dream, every promise God has put in your heart, come to pass.

CHAPTER 2

It's Your Time

For more than forty years, the church custodian known as Mister John offered his fix-it skills to help others in a small Florida town. He and his wife Laverne, the church secretary, were the town's good Samaritans. They didn't have much, but they were the people to call if your fence needed fixing, your car broke down, or your kids needed clothes for school.

Then suddenly the tables were turned. A few years after Mister John and Laverne retired from their church jobs, a fire broke out in their old wood-frame cottage. Half of their home was destroyed.

Before the couple could salvage what remained of their belongings, thieves broke in. They ripped out the copper plumbing and flooded what was left of the house, destroying everything in it.

There wasn't enough insurance money to rebuild. Times were hard for everyone. The recession had left many in their town unemployed, struggling to get by. Mister John and Laverne did not want to add to anyone's burden by asking for help.

What they didn't realize was that it was their time. It was their time to reap the rewards of their faith, kindness, and unselfishness. After so many years of blessing others, it was their time to be blessed.

Mister John and Laverne didn't have to ask for help.

Friends and neighbors simply showed up one by one. They pitched in, offering money, food, furniture, clothing, a place to stay.

Then a local builder came forward. His business had slowed some, too, but he'd done well over the years building luxury homes.

And he had never forgotten that twenty years earlier, as a teenage volunteer at his church, he'd been taught basic carpentry skills by the kindly Mister John.

"I've been waiting all my life to repay him," the builder said.

And so he recruited an architect, roofers, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and other tradespeople to build Mister John and Laverne a new home nearly twice the size of their old one. They donated their time and materials, and they raised money to pay what the insurance did not cover. When the grateful elderly couple moved into their beautiful new cottage, they called it "the house that love built."

God has a way even when it looks like there is no way. God has put promises in every heart. You have dreams and desires, things you want to accomplish, situations you want to see changed. But so often you gave up on those dreams, because it took so long, or because you tried and failed, or because you went through a disappointment, or because somebody didn't treat you right.

You may have become complacent. Maybe you are not pursuing what God has put in your heart. But I want to encourage you today to get your fire back. You have to

stay filled with hope. It may be taking a long time, but God is a faithful God. He is saying that no matter how long it's been, no matter how impossible it looks, if you'll stay in faith, your time is coming.

It's time to believe!

Every dream that's in your heart, every promise that has taken root, God not only put there but has every intention of bringing to pass. I want you to have this attitude: My time is coming. I've been giving and giving. I haven't seen a lot of results, but that's okay. I know my time is coming.

Maybe you are living in a small apartment and all of your friends have nice homes. This attitude will serve you: I'm not discouraged. I know my time is coming.

Maybe you really want to get married but haven't met the right person. Take this attitude: I know God's in control. At the right time He will bring the right person. My time is coming.

This is what hope is all about—believing that the promise God put in you will come to pass. I love what King David says: "I have pitched my tent in the land of hope."

Where have you pitched your tent? What are you expecting each day? What kind of attitude do you have?

"Well, Joel," some might say, "I've been praying for my child for five years. I don't think he ever will change."

Or "Everybody on my job gets promoted except me."

Or even "I tried to launch this business, but nobody would

help me."

In each of these responses, the tent has been pitched in the wrong place. You must believe for God's blessings and favor. You must expect God to turn that around. You need to go dig up your stakes, pack up your belongings, and move out of the land of discouragement.

Move out of the "Not Going to Happen" subdivision.

Move out of "Can't-Do-It-Ville."

Leave "Self-Pity Estates."

Get out of those dead-end neighborhoods and move into a land of hope, a land of faith, a land where you know anything is possible, a place where you know your time is coming.

Brenda Eheart created such a place, one that has benefited the lives of many people, young and old. But she would never have gotten the job done if she hadn't relentlessly pursued her dream. This sociology professor has a passion for "unadoptable" children in foster care, kids who rarely know a loving, stable home. They often bounce from one foster home to another. Many have been abused or neglected.

Most "age out" of the system at eighteen. Often they wind up homeless, on drugs, committing crimes, or in prison. This problem has existed for decades. Professor Eheart wanted to do something about it.

She dreamed of a place where foster-care kids would be permanently adopted and cared for by loving parents.

These parents "would be supported by child therapists, psychologists, and seniors serving as "volunteer grandparents."

This professor had no money and no influence. She was told it was too expensive, that the problem was too big.

She did not give up. One day, she learned that an old air force base near her home in Illinois was shutting down. This base had a nice neighborhood of town homes for air force officers and their families.

Professor Eheart knew nothing about politics. She had no clout. But she convinced the state to give her a million dollars. She bought an entire neighborhood on the old air base.

She called it Hope Meadows.

Since it opened in 1994, Hope Meadows has taken nearly one hundred children out of foster care and given them permanent, loving homes. Some have gone on to college and earned degrees. Others have become hardworking, churchgoing members of their communities.

Brenda Eheart and her nonprofit organization recently received a grant so she can create other Hope Meadows around the country. Her once-impossible dream continues to grow.

Sometimes you just need something spoken over your life. You need someone to jump-start your faith, to breathe new life into your dreams. You may have been through a thousand disappointments. In the natural, you may have every reason to give up on what God's put in your heart.

But I'm asking you to let this simple phrase take root: Your time is coming.

God is in control of your life. He knows exactly where you are. He knows even the hidden dreams He has put in you. The Scripture calls these the secret petitions of our heart. These are the dreams you have not shared with anyone. Maybe you thought they would never work out, or you buried them because they didn't happen on your timetable.

But God still has a way to bring them to pass. Draw the line in the sand and say, "That's it. I'm done being complacent. I'm done settling for mediocrity. I believe every dream, every promise, even the secret petitions of my heart will come to fulfillment."

When you have that kind of attitude, all the forces of darkness cannot stop God from bringing your dreams to pass.

You may be discouraged. Negative thoughts may come, telling you: It never will happen. You never will marry. You never will be free of debt. You never will find happiness. This is as good as it gets.

You have to shake off those thoughts. Say: "Father, You said the path of the righteous gets brighter and brighter. You said no good thing will You withhold, because I walk uprightly. You said because I delight myself in You, You would give me the secret petitions of my heart. So, Father, I want to thank you that You are in control of my life, good things are in store, and I believe my time is coming."

Stay in an attitude of faith, an attitude of expectancy.

You will go through unfair situations. We all do. When somebody does you wrong or you get some bad breaks, don't make the mistake of constantly dwelling on the downside. Too many pitch their tents in the land of self-pity. Somebody mistreated them a year ago, five years ago, thirty years ago, and they allow it to poison their lives.

If somebody does you wrong, instead of getting negative and bitter, your attitude should be: They just did me a favor. They just qualified me for double. And I believe my time is coming. I will come out with twice the joy, twice the peace, twice the victory.

That's an attitude of hope, an attitude that says: I will not be defeated. It may look impossible, but I know God can do the impossible. They may have treated me wrong. I'm not worried. I know God is my vindicator. It may be taking a long time, but in due season I know I will reap if I just don't give up.

You may have been through a series of losses. Life may not seem fair. It's easy to think: It never will be better. This just is my lot in life. If you are not careful, your negative thoughts will draw in more of the negative. It begins with one unfair situation, and then we perpetuate it by having and holding on to the wrong mind-sets. I'm asking you to break out of that rut. You may have been through unfair situations, but it's not over until God says it's over.

God always has the final say. He is a God of justice. God sees every wrong that's ever been done to you. He sees every unfair situation. He says that if you will stay in faith, if you'll keep your hopes up, He will make your

wrongs right. He will bring justice into your life. Your attitude should be: It may have been unfair. They may have done me wrong. But I refuse to get bitter. I know my time is coming.

There's a lady in the Scriptures by the name of Naomi. Her name means "my joy." So when anyone said, "Hello, Naomi," they were saying, "Hello, my joy." "Good morning, Naomi. Good morning, my joy."

In Scripture, Naomi goes through a series of losses. Her husband dies. She becomes distraught. Then her sons are killed in battle. All these negative things hit her, then she makes the mistake of letting the bitterness get on the inside. She gets soured on life. Her attitude is: All my dreams have been shattered. Just leave me in my heartache and misery.

But that's not God's plan. Sure, it's difficult when we go through a time of loss. There's a proper time for grieving. But we can't let a season of mourning turn into a lifetime of mourning. Naomi became so bitter she actually changed her name to Mara. Mara means "sorrow."

She had lost her joy and hope, so she asked to be called by the new name. Every time someone called her Mara, they were simply reminding her of her heartache and pain, and that made her feel even more defeated.

Don't let bad breaks change your meaning and purpose. You may have been through unfair situations. Maybe one of your dreams has died. Let me assure you God still has a great plan for your life. When one door closes, He will always open up another. You need to dig in your heels and say, "I may have been through a lot, but I've come too far

to stop now. I refuse to get bitter. I refuse to live my life in the negative. I know God has great things in store."

David said in Psalm 27:13: "What would have become of me had I not believed that I would see the Lord's goodness ..." No matter what comes your way, let this take root. You have to believe you will see God's goodness again. You must believe you will see God turn it around. Believe you will see God open up new doors.

There's something about a person filled with hope.

When you feel like dying, you should talk about living. When you feel like giving up, you should talk about pressing forward. When you don't see any way out, you must talk about how God can make a way. And know this: The enemy always fights you the hardest when he knows God has something great in store.

When the bottom falls out and it looks like you hit an all-time low . . . when it just couldn't get any worse . . . you don't know what God has around the corner. That is not the time to get bitter. That's not the time to get negative. That is the time to put your shoulders back and boldly declare: "My time is coming. I am a victor and not a victim."

Someone told me the story of Thomas, who was alone on his boat when a big storm rose up. His boat capsized. He swam to shore and found himself alone on a deserted island. As the weeks passed, Thomas became so miserable, so distraught. He didn't think he would ever be found. He prayed and prayed, but the heavens seemed silent. Just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, his thatched-roof hut caught fire.

Thomas sat there weeping as his shelter went up in flames. It was like pouring salt on his wounds.

"God, I give up," he said. "I ask You to help me, but one bad thing after another happens."

He was so down, so discouraged.

Then, about an hour later, a Coast Guard rescue boat pulled up to the beach. Thomas could not believe it. He was thrilled.

"How in the world did you find me?" he asked.

"We saw the smoke coming from the signal fire you built," they said.

Sometimes what looks like a disappointment is simply God getting us in position for a rescue! You may feel defeated because your hut is on fire today. But instead of getting negative and bitter, why don't you take a different perspective? Believe that God will somehow, someway, turn the burning fires to your advantage.

Maybe you are like Naomi; you feel your life's been put on hold.

You've had so much go against you and so many things have not worked. Negative thoughts are telling you: It never will change. It never will be better. You never will be healthy. You never will be happy.

Don't believe the "never" lies. God says, "Your time is coming."

Maybe you were counting on people to give you breaks. You were good to them. You went out of your way to help them succeed. But when you needed help, they were nowhere to be found.

Understand, your destiny is not tied to them. Don't be discouraged because somebody walked away. Don't be bitter toward a boss, a business associate, a friend who was promoted and forgot all about you. You don't need them to succeed. God already has the right people lined up to come into your life. He has your divine connections.

Just stay in faith, and God will get you to where you need to be.

In the Scripture God tells Simeon that he would not die until he saw the Christ. Simeon did not understand, but he let God's promise take root deep down inside. He didn't tell anybody about God's message. It was just between him and God.

Some commentaries say Simeon waited nearly twenty years. I can imagine the older he grew, the more he was tempted to think: I must not have heard God right. It never will happen. It's been five years, now ten years.

No, Simeon had to do just what I'm asking us to do. When those negative thoughts came, he had to shake them off and say, "No, my time is coming. The promise is in me. God put it in my heart. And I will not go to my grave until I see it fulfilled."

He rose every morning hoping, believing, expecting. And God is faithful, for some twenty years later Simeon saw

that promise come to pass.

God speaks to us all just as he did to Simeon. Deep down on the inside you have dreams that you know will come to pass before you leave this earth. It may be a promise that a child will return to the right path. Maybe your child has been oil that path for live, ten, fifteen years.

Do what Simeon did. Just remind God: "You put this promise in me that as for me and my house we will serve the Lord. And I believe I will not go to my grave until I see my whole family serving you."

Maybe God put a promise on you that day you were married. You've been through some disappointments, some broken relationships. You're a little older. You're tempted to think it will not happen. No, God has already picked out the right person. And you're never too old.

Just recently I met a couple in their nineties. They'd just had their wedding and were on their honeymoon. Now, I know you don't want to wait until your nineties to get married. I'm just giving you the worst-case scenario. Then again, I heard about this eighty-five-year-old woman who went on a blind date with a ninety-two-year-old man.

She came home very frustrated. Her daughter said, "Mom, what went wrong on your date?"

"I had to slap him three times," she said.

"You mean he tried to get fresh?" the daughter asked.

"No. I thought he was dead."

Maybe God's put one of these promises in you instead: that one day you will write a book, be in management, open a successful business, or join the ministry. But now, like Simeon, you are doubtful that your dream will ever happen. Negative thoughts creep in: You're getting too old. You don't have the right connections. You've made too many mistakes.

Sometimes the more we believe, the more we pray, the less likely it looks. It's easy to get complacent and to let the seed die stillborn. But I'm asking you to do what Simeon did.

No matter how long it's been, no matter how tempted you are to get discouraged, get up every morning and just declare it by faith: "My time is coming. The promise is in me, and I will not die until I see it come to pass."

You might say, "Well Joel, I've been giving. I've been tithing my income for ten years. I don't see anything happening."

My advice is to stay faithful. Your time is coming.

Maybe you've been working in the same job for twenty years, showing up early, giving it your best, but the promotion has never come.

Do not get bitter. Don't get negative. You're not working unto man. You're working unto God. And if you'll keep the right attitude, your time of promotion will come.

God is keeping the records. He sees every seed you've ever sown. ***What you sow you will reap.***

If Simeon were standing before us today, he'd say, "Don't give up on that promise. Your time is coming."

You need to let Simeon's story sink deep down on the inside. Some of you thought it was over. Some of you thought you made too many mistakes. You thought you were getting too old. But it's never too late. God says "This is your season. Keep your faith stirred up."

God put a promise in Moses that he would deliver the people of Israel, but Moses made a major mistake. He killed somebody and had to run for his life. Forty years went by. It looked like he was done. It seemed like it was over.

But God never aborts a dream. We may give up on it. We may delay it. But the seed God put in you never dies.

All it takes is for you to believe once again.

Forty years later, when Moses was eighty years old, God came back and said, "Moses, it's your time now."

You may have made mistakes. Maybe you've blown some good opportunities. Join the crowd. We all have our failures and defeats.

The good news is that God never disqualifies us. God never writes us off.

You may say, "Joel, you don't know what I've done wrong. You don't know the life I've lived. You don't know the people I've hurt."

Maybe I don't, but know this: Nothing you've done is

beyond the mercy of God. If you get knocked down, all you have to do is get back up. Don't stay down.

Your time may already be here.

You've sown unto so many others. You've been faithful day in and day out. You've done the right thing when the wrong thing was happening. God is saying: "It's your time now."

You may have had great things happen in the past, but you haven't seen anything yet. Your best days are not behind you. They are still out in front of you.

For some of you, it will be a new season of increase, a new season of promotion, a new season of blessing. Or it may be a time of vindication, a time when God will make your wrongs right.

God will bring justice into your life. It may be a time of supernatural strength where you'll break addictions, break bad habits, break wrong mind-sets. Maybe your buried dreams will come to pass. God will open up new opportunities. He will bring the right people across your path because you've been faithful. Because you've been a prisoner of hope, you will enter into a new season of victory.

You may have been treated unfairly. Maybe you've had heartache and pain. Don't give up. Be prepared. God may well be introducing you to a time of supernatural strength or great insights that will allow you to overcome your challenges.

Dr. Syed Naqvi was jogging on a treadmill in his home

when he went into cardiac arrest. Emergency workers and doctors kept the fifty-six-year-old neurologist alive, but he was in a vegetative state, unable to breathe on his own.

His wife, Nina, refused to give up. She contacted another neurologist, a family friend, and pleaded for his help. This doctor had just learned of a new "cooling treatment" for cardiac arrest patients. If the treatment begins within six hours of the attack, the patient has a much greater chance of full recovery.

Dr. Naqvi's brainwaves were nearly flat. They literally put him on ice. His body was cooled for twenty-four hours. His temperature dropped to eight degrees below normal. His wife and other family members waited and prayed.

Was it their time to believe?

Yes, it was.

Five days later. Dr. Naqvi came out of his coma. At first, he was confused and had memory lapses. But within six weeks, his mental functions were fully restored. He went from a life-threatening vegetative state to once again treating his own patients!

Stay in faith. Be a prisoner of hope. God will put the right people in your path. Even the secret petitions of your heart, God will bring to fulfillment. You must rise up, like Mrs. Naqvi, and block out negative thoughts and say, "You know what? This is for me. With my faith I will ignite this moment. With my faith I will bring forth the dream on the inside."

The Scripture encourages us to fan the flame. At eighty years of age, Moses saw his time come. After thirteen years of being done wrong, Joseph saw his time come. If God did it for them, He can do it for you. Keep your faith stirred up. You've served others. You've given generously. You've sacrificed your time. And that's great. That's what life is all about.

Ignite this moment.

The apostle Peter was in the boat with all the other disciples when they saw Jesus walking on the water. Why did Peter want to get out and join Jesus on the water? Why did he think he could do that?

Was it because he had seen Jesus open the blind eyes and cleanse the lepers and do all those miraculous things? Maybe, but the other disciples in the boat had seen the same things. Why didn't they want to get out? Peter understood it was his time. He stirred up his faith. He ignited that moment and believed he could do what God put in his heart.

Jesus said, "Peter, do you want to get out of the boat?"

"Yes, I do," said Peter.

"Well, get out."

Peter stepped out of the boat and he walked on the water.

Sure, he sank. Yes, he went under. But Peter walked on water farther than you or I have ever gone!

Maybe you need to be instilled with Peter's boldness.

Don't just believe your time is coming; believe your time is here! All the dreams you've buried, those desires you thought would never work out—it's time to believe. You need to have the attitude: It's my time to come up to a new level. I've seen it happen for others, but it's my time to see God's blessings and favor. It's my time to accomplish my dreams. It's my time to break these addictions.

No more sitting around wishing your dream would come true. No more bitterness, hurt, or jealousy. Your time has come!

Say what Peter said: "God, can I walk with you? I believe it's my time now."

Notice what Jesus said. He didn't say, "Peter, stay in that boat. Don't you know I'm the Son of God?"

He said, "Peter, I like your attitude of faith. I like the fact you believe you could do great things. That tells me it's your time now."

We all have dreams yet to unfold. Stay filled with hope. Don't get complacent and think your dream never will happen. Understand that God is working behind the scenes right now, arranging for your dreams to flourish.

I believe even the chains of mediocrity, failure, and addiction are being broken as you read this. It may look like your dream has died, but the good news is: God can resurrect even dead dreams.

He did it for Moses. He can do it for you.

Get up every morning and declare it by faith: "My time is

coming." If you do that, I believe like Simeon, before you leave this earth, you'll see God bring to pass every dream He's put in your heart.

CHAPTER 3

Seizing Your God-Given Opportunities

God created every one of us to be successful. Before the foundation of the world, He laid out an exact plan for our lives. And in this plan He has moments of favor that will come across our path. These moments are not ordinary. They are destiny-altering moments. They are designed to thrust us years ahead.

Marie worked at a small restaurant near Los Angeles. She waited on tables, cooked, cleaned, basically did it all. One day her boss, the owner, said that more and more customers were requesting desserts. At that time the restaurant didn't offer any. The boss told Marie she had to come in earlier to make desserts every morning. Her first reaction was frustration.

I already work hard enough, she thought. This is not fair.

But instead of getting bitter, Marie decided to accept the new duty as a challenge. She set her sights on creating the best desserts she possibly could.

Marie's pies caught on. Customers loved them. In fact, people came to the restaurant just to have a piece of her pie. Her pies became so popular Marie decided to open her own pie company.

She took a step of faith and things quickly fell into place. She found a bakery. She bought the equipment she needed. It was a moment of favor.

Before long, her little business began to grow and her son joined her. They opened more and more locations. Eventually, Marie Callender's company had 110 restaurants and an entire line of frozen pies and entrees sold in supermarkets!

It doesn't matter where you are right now; God has moments of favor for you, too. You may not be able to figure it out, but that's okay. That's not your job. Your job is to believe. God's already figured it out.

You might say: "Joel, I'm just not that talented."

Can you make a pie? Look what happened to Marie!

I want you to have a bigger vision for your life. There are exciting things in your future. The right people are out there. The breaks you need have already been lined up by the Creator of the universe.

What can stop them? Not the enemy, not other people, nobody can keep you from your destiny—except you.

You may have suffered some bad breaks. You may have tried and failed. Now you may be sitting on the sidelines of life, not expecting anything good. Shake off that defeated mentality. Rise up and say, "This is a new day. It may not have happened in the past, but it will happen someday. I know God has moments of favor coming my way!"

It's time to believe.

God has already prearranged times of increase, times of blessing. You will have opportunities to meet the right

people, opportunities to advance in your career, opportunities to fulfill your dreams. You may not be experiencing any good breaks right now. Maybe you're stuck in a rut. But let me encourage you with this: In your future there are God-ordained moments. He has them planned out for you.

Too many people miss these moments. They tried and failed before, so they quit believing. Or they're distracted. There is so much clutter in their lives they can't hear the still, small voice inside telling them: It's your moment of favor!

We have to be sensitive to God's timing. We may go five years with nothing big happening, and then all of a sudden, a God-ordained moment comes along: You meet someone who changes your life, you get a loan to buy the house of your dreams, you are promoted to a new job.

In a split second you are thrust years ahead.

I can look back over my own life and see the moments that altered my destiny, moments that propelled me to a higher level. When I was in my early twenties, I walked into a jewelry store to buy a battery for my watch. That's where I met Victoria—a moment of favor!

That wasn't a lucky break. That was God bringing time and chance together. He ordained that moment before the foundation of the world. That's why we don't have to worry. We don't have to go around frustrated because things aren't happening as fast as we would like. All we have to do is stay in faith, knowing that God is directing our steps. As long as we keep believing, our moments of favor are on their way.

I love what David said in Psalm 31:15: "God, my times are in Your hands ..." He was saying, "God, I already know You have supernatural breaks planned out for me. You have the right people, the right opportunities, so I will not be stressed out. I will stay in peace knowing that You will get me to my final destination."

Recognize and appreciate each opportunity.

It's easy to get frustrated when your dreams aren't coming to pass on your timetable. But be patient. Prepare yourself. Stay open for signs of opportunity.

Sure, we would love to always be moving ahead with our lives, but we can use the other times to get ready, to sharpen our skills, to deepen our knowledge, to prepare ourselves for promotion.

If you're not making as much progress as you would like, here's a key: Don't lose any ground. Don't go backward. Keep a good attitude, and do the right thing even when it's hard. When you do that, you pass the test. God promises your moments of favor are on the way.

A few years after Victoria and I were married, we were living in a beautiful town house just as happy as can be. One day out of the blue, Victoria said, "We need to sell this place." When she said that, I sense of peace came over me. I knew that she was right.

In the natural, we could have thought, *We're fine. We're comfortable here.* But we paid attention to that still, small voice, that inward witness, telling us, "Something better is on the horizon."

And so we went out looking. We knew every home for sale in every neighborhood within ten miles of us. We looked for months and months. And one Sunday afternoon we found this old house. It was run-down but stood on a beautiful piece of property.

Windows were broken out. Water dripped from the ceiling. But something deep inside us said, "This is it. This is a God-given opportunity."

We took that step of faith, and in less than three years we sold that property for more than twice what we paid for it! That blessed opportunity put us at a new level. Time and chance came together, and we took advantage of it.

You might say: "Joel, I don't have those resources. I haven't had those breaks." That doesn't matter. God doesn't say: "Time and chance will not come together for you if you don't have enough financing or money in the bank."

Get this down in your spirit: God has preordained moments of favor for you. He has already lined up the right people, the right breaks, the right opportunities. He's prearranged them for your future.

Just a few years ago, we were searching for property to build a new sanctuary on. Twice, the land we found was sold out from under us. It was unfair. We were very disappointed.

But I've found sometimes God closes a door because we were believing too small. If He were to answer our prayers every time and give us everything we asked for, it

might not always be His best. So don't be discouraged by your closed doors.

The steps and the stops of a good person are ordered by the Lord. If a door closes, that just means God has something better and most likely bigger in store. A few months after that door closed on us, we received word that the much larger Compaq Center was available for purchase.

God definitely had a bigger dream in mind for us!

In the same way, his dream for your life is so much bigger than your own. He has breaks lined up for you in the future, but if He told you right now, it would boggle your mind. You will look back one day and say, "Man, that was a blessed opportunity. I could have never orchestrated that all on my own."

That's the way our God is. The Scripture says that no person has ever seen, heard, or imagined the wonderful things He has in store.

I think about how this one blessed opportunity—acquiring the Compaq Center—thrust our ministry probably fifty years further down the road. As far as reaching people, as far as credibility, that one event did more than I could do in my whole lifetime in my own effort.

This was planned before the foundation of time. I met a man who helped design the Compaq Center; he was one of the original engineers. He explained that way back in the sixties, he laid out the entry and exit ramps of the freeway to flow perfectly into this building. He worked with the

city to time all the traffic lights so people could get in and out of the center quickly.

As he spoke, I thought about how good God is: Forty years ago he had people working on our behalf!

My friend, God has it all planned out. Know that in your future He's already lined up increase, good breaks, divine connections. He has great things in store.

Maybe you've made mistakes or poor choices. You may feel you've blown chances. But God is full of mercy. He knew every mistake you would ever make, and He already has moments of favor to bring you out.

Where you are is no surprise to God. He's not up in the heavens all baffled, thinking, Man, I never knew he'd get that far off track. I didn't know he'd blow it that bad.

No, God knew you were where you would be before the foundation of time. He's already blessed your opportunities of mercy and restoration. The fact is, God has solutions to problems you haven't yet encountered. He knows, "This door will close, they will stray a little off course here, make a mistake there. And so I will have this person come into their life, and this opportunity will correct it a little more, and this other one will give them a break."

God's figured it out.

Samuel Herschberger was just three days away from his tenth birthday when he was in a terrible farm accident. The boy's shirt sleeve was snared in a grinder attached to a tractor. His father Oba sprinted to help Samuel, but the

sight of his mangled boy caused him to stop and turn away in shock. He was certain that Samuel was dead. He could not look.

Then he heard a tiny, pleading voice.

"Dad, please help me."

No one thought Samuel would survive. Eleven doctors worked eighteen straight hours to save him. As you might imagine, the medical costs were staggering for the family. Fellow church members pitched in. But they could barely make a dent.

Still, God had a solution.

The Herschbergers began hosting farm-style dinners in their home to raise money. A Chicago newspaper reported on their fund-raising efforts. A few weeks later, Oba had to ask people to stop sending money. "We have so much coming in, we can't count it all," he said.

They filled their bathtubs with checks and cash sent by strangers. Many thousands were donated—enough to pay for the thirty-seven operations Samuel has had to endure. Today, he is a fun-loving young man who works on a farm, helping raise champion draft horses. His grateful family still welcomes guests for country dinners. God knows the end from the beginning. He has solutions to problems you haven't even had.

You don't know what God has in store.

God may have spoken to someone twenty years ago about that situation you're dealing with right now. He has

already marked your moments for mercy. He has marked moments of favor for restoration. He knows how to get you back on the tight track.

So go ahead and get your hopes up. Believe that no matter what you have or haven't done, your best days are still out in front of you.

Little things and big things, God has already lined up your moments of favor. Why don't you quit worrying about it? Why don't you stop losing sleep over it? God has you in the palm of His hand. God is aware of all you are facing now and all you will deal with in the future.

The good news is, He already has answers to those problems. The Scripture says: "For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "Plans to prosper you, plans to bless you, plans to give you hope and a future." One verse says, "God has prearranged for you to live the good life."

For every setback, God has prearranged a comeback. For every failure, God has prearranged mercy. For every disappointment, God has prearranged restoration. For every unfair thing, God has prearranged vindication.

In God's eyes, your future is looking extremely bright.

I read a fascinating report on the hopper, a baby locust. These young bugs can't quite fly, but they can jump up to two hundred times their height. The hopper learns to fly by riding the wind. When the wind blows and treetops rustle, the hopper's instincts say: "This is my time to jump."

The hopper can catch the wind and fly if it rides the

breeze. So timing is critical. Adult locusts also wait for perfect wind conditions so they can migrate miles and miles. They don't have the most aerodynamic bodies. Locusts are thick-bodied insects with small straight wings. So they need to time their leaps just right.

Like the hoppers and the locusts, we need to know when it is our time to ride the wind. We have to stay tuned to signs of opportunity just as the hoppers wait for the breeze to pick up.

For us, there is a window of opportunity to step out in faith. I recognize signs and patterns in my own life. There have been times when I'm not seeing a lot of increase. I'm just trying my best day in and day out, being faithful, being good to people.

Several years will go by, then all of a sudden I see all kinds of increase, all kinds of favor, good breaks left and right. What happened? I know it couldn't just be me. My wings aren't that big. I've caught the wind of God's favor. I'm riding God's own jet stream.

Too often, though, we miss opportunities because we don't recognize it's our season. You need to pay attention to the winds in your life. I believe there's about to be a shifting. Maybe you've been struggling and not seeing a lot of good breaks, but the winds are about to change in your favor.

I was out running one day. The first quarter of a mile or so the wind was blowing so strongly against me, probably twenty-five miles an hour. I felt like I was running uphill. It was taking all of my energy.

Finally, I was able to turn. The path I run on is a big square. I knew coming back the last mile or so that wind would be blowing in my face again. I was dreading it.

But when I made the turn into the final home stretch, I was pleasantly surprised. The winds had changed direction. They were no longer blowing against me; they were blowing with me. It was a night-and-day difference. I could feel the winds propelling me forward.

I believe that's what will happen to you. The winds holding you back, causing you to struggle, are about to change in your favor.

You will enjoy times where you can feel God breathing in your direction. You will accomplish things that cause you to look back and say, "That had to be the hand of God. I'm not that smart. I'm not that talented."

What happened? The wind of Almighty God is blowing behind you. You may be in some kind of storm today with all kinds of things coming against you, but understand, God is in control of those winds. Just a simple shift can make a huge difference. The same winds that are trying to defeat you, God can make blow in a different direction and propel you into a higher level.

When my father went to be with the Lord, the winds tried to sink me, but God turned around and used the winds to push me into my divine destiny. What the enemy means for your harm, God will turn around and use to your advantage.

I can sense in my spirit the winds are shifting. I can sense an increase in God's blessings. When you hear these

winds blowing, you can't just sit back and think, Ah, Joel. It will not happen to me. I never get good breaks.

No, you will miss your moment of favor. When you hear the winds blowing, do like that little locust and say, "This is my time. I can hear the winds of God's favor. I will become everything God's created me to be."

You may have a lot coming against you, but have you ever realized that all it takes for the last to be first is the wind's changing direction? If it's all blowing against you, you may feel like you're last, way in the back. But when the winds shift and blow with you, all of a sudden you're first. What happens? The winds shifted.

If you are in difficult times, instead of complaining and getting discouraged, you need to get up every morning and say by faith: "Father, thank you that the winds are shifting in my direction. Thank you that the tide of this battle is turning."

Don't talk about the storm. Talk to your storm. Look at that situation and declare by faith, "You will not defeat me. No weapon formed against me will ever prosper. I have moments of favor coming my way. I'm not only coming out, I'm coming out better off than I was before."

I love what David did when he faced Goliath. He could hear the treetops rustling. He'd been faithful in the wilderness for years. Now he could sense the winds were shifting—even though Goliath was two or three times his size.

Doubters tried to talk him out of facing the giant. "David, you don't have a chance. David, you will be hurt." Others

couldn't hear the winds. They couldn't sense what he was sensing. When you know it's your time, don't get talked out of it. I've seen people sit back twenty years, allowing other people to discourage them, talk them out of their dreams.

"Do you really think you can do that? I don't know if you have what it takes."

No, others don't know what's in you. They don't know what you're capable of because God didn't put the dream in them; He put it in you. When you hear the wind blowing, like that little locust, you should say, "This is my time."

If you'll get in the flow of God, you'll be amazed at how far you can go. When God's breathing in your direction, there's a supernatural ease. There's a grace to do things that you couldn't do before.

The doubters said, "David, you better not take a chance. Goliath, he's too big to hit."

David said, "I don't think so. He's too big to miss."

David spoke to his mountain. He said, "Goliath, this day I will defeat you and feed your head to the birds of the air."

What caused that little stone to slay the giant?

God breathed His life into it. The wind of Almighty God rose behind it. That's what happens when you make a leap of faith. You will accomplish things that you never thought possible.

You might say: "Joel, I don't see how this opportunity could happen for me. I don't have the money. I don't have the education. I don't have the talent."

The Scripture says it will not happen by our might or by our power. It will happen because of the breath of Almighty God. You know what's happening today? God's breathing in your direction. Sometimes we think of a breath as just a little puff of air. That's not the way God breathes.

The Scripture says that when the Holy Spirit came, it was like a rushing, mighty wind. That's what I envision behind you: the force of Almighty God. Everywhere you go, you need to imagine the most powerful force in the universe breathing in your direction.

What happens when God breathes your way? Every enemy will be defeated, obstacles will be overcome, favor will increase, dreams will come to pass.

What happened? God breathed in your direction. A rushing, mighty wind is backing you up. Rise up in your authority and say, "You know what? I can hear the wind blowing so I'm stepping into the flow."

Things are shifting in your favor, my friend. Your future is filled with moments of favor, increase, promotion. God has already ordained before the foundation of the world the right people.

Time and chance are coming together for you. Get a vision for it. Raise your hopes. Don't miss your moment of favor. Even when it's difficult for you, just remember the same winds trying to defeat you are the winds God will

use to push you to a new level.

If you'll go out each day with expectancy, knowing that God is breathing in your direction, I know you will rise higher and higher and see more of God's blessings and favor. And you'll live the life of victory He has in store.

CHAPTER 4

New Seasons Of Increase

Tyler grew up poor in New Orleans in a household he's described as "scarred by abuse," so he ran away to Atlanta, where he lived homeless on the streets. It was a hard life. He has called his first twenty-eight years "unhappy and miserable."

I'm glad to say, Tyler found his new season of increase. Still, it is easy to get stuck in a rut like Tyler did. You don't expect anything. You don't grow. You don't press forward. And that's when negative thoughts come telling us that we've reached our limits and that we will never accomplish our goals. It's all downhill from here.

Don't ever believe those lies. God is a God of increase, not decrease. He never wants us to go backward; only forward. It is true that Job said: "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away."

Still, when it was all said and done, Job held on to his faith and ended up with twice what he had before. God restored back to him double. And sure, there are seasons where we're not seeing a lot of growth, seasons where we have to dig our heels in and fight the good fight of faith. But I can sense in my spirit that we are entering into new seasons of increase, new seasons of favor.

It's time to believe.

You have to believe, as Tyler does now, that no matter what's come against you, no matter how unfair it was,

things are shifting in your favor. Tyler said the one thing that always kept him grounded was his faith. Every setback is simply a setup for a come back. God not only wants to bring you out, He also wants to bring you out better than you were before.

For Tyler, the season began turning when he started keeping a journal. He wrote about his feelings and his frustrations. He wrote about his experiences. But he was afraid that someone might read his journal. So Tyler made up characters in his journal. That way, no one would know the stories were about him.

Tyler's characters and stories launched his career as a writer and producer of plays, movies, and books. He now lives in a beautiful home on twelve acres outside Atlanta. His new home reflects the new season in his life. And so does his attitude about his success.

"I am a believer, and I know had I not been a person of faith, I couldn't be here in this place and I wouldn't be walking the path that I'm on now," he told an interviewer.

Tyler Perry believes that as low as a person can go, it is possible for the same person to go just as high. And even higher still. You may come from a history of abuse. Your relationships might have gone bad. Money might be scarce. Even so, you too have new seasons of increase coming.

God said He would make your enemies your footstools. I interpret that to mean that God will use the obstacles in your path, the stumbling blocks that would hold you back, as stepping-stones instead. He will use them to take you to a higher level.

It's as though somebody stuck out his foot to trip you, but God caused you to step right on top of it. Instead of going down, you went up!

You may be facing a sickness today. It was meant to harm you. It was meant to bring you down. But let me speak faith into you. That sickness will not defeat you. You have been armed with strength for every battle. The forces for you are greater than the forces against you.

I want to declare over you a new season in your health. The winds are shifting. Hard times may have held you down for a while, but they will not last forever. When all is said and done, you will not be decreased; you will be increased.

You will step on top of these obstacles and use them as stepping-stones. You will come out stronger, more determined, with a greater faith than you've ever had before.

Get a vision for it. Let these seeds take root. New seasons in your health. New seasons in your pocketbook. New seasons in your relationships.

You still might have doubts: "Ah, Joel. My business is so slow. The economy is really hurting me."

No, God is not limited by the economy. God is not limited by our education or our lack of it. God is not limited by the environment we were raised in.

God is limited by our beliefs. I'm asking you to believe that things are shifting in your favor.

Psalm 102:13 says there was a set time for favor. That means there was a set time for people to receive increase, a set time they would see blessings. It's the same way today. God has seasons in which supernatural doors will open, seasons in which you will accomplish things you never thought possible, seasons in which you'll see great things begin to happen.

I believe you have entered into one of those seasons—a set time for God's favor.

Well, you say, "Joel, I don't believe that. You're just getting everybody's hopes up." Then this is not for you. This is for believers. This is for people who will rise up and say, "You know what? That bears witness with my spirit. This is my season, and I will take hold of it."

Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me to help the poor, to comfort the hurting, and to announce the acceptable year of the Lord." One translation says "to declare the year of God's favor."

In this passage there had been years of famine, years of fighting, years of judgment. But God was saying, "This is your season of favor."

He announced it to people just as I'm telling it to you. But do you know not everyone took it? Some people thought, Oh, I've been through too much. I'll never get well. I'll never get out of debt. I'll never accomplish my dreams.

You know what happened? They missed their season of favor. Don't let that be you.

You may feel like you've been rowing upstream. Life's been a constant struggle, all kinds of things coming against you. But God says, "Things are about to shift in your favor."

You are about to enter into an anointing of ease. You may have had disappointments in the past, but God will turn your life around and open new doors. And for the unfair things that have happened—people talking about you at work, trying to bring you down—don't get discouraged. This is your season of vindication.

The Scripture says that the trap the enemy set for you, they will fall into themselves. You don't have to worry. You don't have to fight. Stay on the high road. This is your season of increase.

"Well," you say, "Joel, when I look out into my future, I don't see any of this. I don't see how I could ever get well." Or you might say, "I've had this addiction my whole life. I don't know how I could overcome it."

The problem is, you're only looking in the natural. We serve a supernatural God.

When I announce it's your season, deep inside something resonates. Deep down something says, "Yes, this is for me. I know there are good things in store."

That is your spirit person agreeing with God. But too often we allow our minds, our natural reasoning, to talk us out of it. We must learn to listen to what we're hearing down inside.

You must sense it before it arrives.

Sometimes when we look out into our futures, we don't see anything good. We don't see how we could ever get out of debt. We don't see how our child could ever get back on the right track. In the natural, it looks impossible, but deep down we can sense that somehow, someday it will work out. Maybe business is slow, sales are down, but I can sense increase is on its way. I can sense this is my season of favor. I can sense my best days are out in front of me.

On paper, it doesn't look possible, but I sense new seasons of increase, seasons of promotion, supernatural opportunities are coming my way. You have to be perceptive and sense what is coming long before it arrives. Learn to walk by faith and not by sight.

I love what Elijah did. There had been a drought in the land for three and a half years. People were in desperate need of water. He went to King Ahab and said, "Ahab, I hear the sound of the abundance of rain."

In fact, there wasn't a cloud in the sky when he said that. There wasn't rain in the distance. It wasn't thundering. But Elijah could sense what was coming long before it arrived.

I can imagine Ahab looking at him and thinking: What's wrong with him? There's no rain. It's not thundering. The heat must be getting to him.

Elijah didn't hear it physically, in the natural. He heard it down in his spirit. And he was bold enough to announce it.

When you sense it's your season, you need to declare it. Words have creative power. You need to hear it, and so does the enemy. You may not feel well, but it's good to announce: "Health is coming my way. I will live and not die."

People may look at you like Ahab looked at Elijah and think: What's wrong with you? You don't look well. You look sick.

But they can't hear the sound. They can't sense what you're sensing. They're just looking in the natural. And don't be surprised if your mind tells you things like, "You're just kidding yourself. You will never get well."

Just answer back: "Yes I will. I can hear it down in here."

Negative voices may say: "You'll never be debt-free." But you can respond: "I can hear the sound of abundance."

Doubts may tell you: "You will never be married."

But you can hear the sound of God's favor: "Sure, I will. I may not be able to see it, but I can sense victory, promotion, divine connections, supernatural opportunities—they're coming my way."

You still may not see how a new season of increase could happen for you.

That's because you are sensing the wrong things. You are sensing defeat, failure, mediocrity. That will only draw in negative feelings. It's like you're inviting negative forces into your life.

You need to listen to these new sounds.

I can see over you an abundance of favor, an abundance of good breaks, an abundance of health, abundance in your finances, and an abundance of victory.

God is a God of abundance. He's saying today, "This is your season. This is your set time for favor." Why don't you let that seed of hope take root in your heart?

My father's sister Mary struggled with epilepsy. She'd have convulsions and terrible headaches. It was crippling her life. At one point an infection caused her to hallucinate. Her mind was not clear. She had been in the hospital for a long time. Then, she went home and fell into a coma. She couldn't recognize people. She couldn't feed herself. She needed twenty-four-hour care.

My father was living in another city and traveling so much that he did not realize how sick Mary had become. One day his mother, my grandmother, called to tell him of Mary's condition. Daddy was scheduled to go out of town for week or so. But that next morning while he was praying, God spoke to him. Not out loud, but deep inside.

My father recalled this very distinct phrase: The hour of Mary's deliverance has come.

Notice there's a set time for favor, a set time for increase, even a set time for deliverance. After my father finished praying, he opened his Bible and flipped through it. He randomly pointed to a scripture, hoping that God would give him a sign.

We've all done this before. It certainly doesn't always

work. But this day he pointed to Luke 1:30. It says, "Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

He knew God was saying: This is Mary's season.

That morning, my father drove 240 miles from Houston to Dallas. When he went into Mary's room, it was dark, the lights were off, and the shades were pulled. Mary didn't even recognize him. Her hair was matted. Her eyes were glassy, a holy anger came over my father. He went to the window shades, opened them, and said, "God is light. Let light in this room." He looked at Mary and said sternly, "Don't tell me God did this to my sister." He began to pray and pray, and then he whispered, "Mary, I want you to get up out of this bed."

She immediately sat up. She hadn't walked in months. But that moment she rose from bed and walked around the house. Her mind cleared. She spoke to my father.

That same day she sat at the dinner table and fed herself. That same day she no longer needed her medicine. She sent away her twenty-four-hour care.

What happened? God shifted things in Mary's favor. Her set time for deliverance had come. My father asked, "Mary, why did you get up out of bed so quickly?"

She said, "Because I heard God tell me to get up."

My father corrected her. "No, Mary. I told you to get up."

She was adamant: "No, I heard God tell me to get up."

"No, Mary," my father insisted. "I was standing over you. I

said 'Mary, get up.'"

Mary would not back down.

"Listen here, John," she said. "I heard the Creator of the universe. I heard Almighty God. He told me to get up out of that bed. And when I heard His voice, every fiber of my being came alive. It was God's voice!"

When you stay in faith, God will cause you to hear what you need to hear. Later, Mary wrote in her book that even though her mind was unclear for months, even though she was going in and out of consciousness, deep down inside she could sense something good was coming.

She could sense that one day she would be totally free; one day she would live a normal, healthy life.

If you listen way down on the inside, even in your dark hours, you will hear God whispering, "Something better is on the horizon."

Even when it looks impossible, you'll hear that still, small voice telling you, "I can turn it around. I can do what men can't do."

When everybody else is saying you're done, it's over, it never will be better, down in your spirit God will be saying, "I have a new beginning. I can resurrect those dead dreams. Your best days are still out in front of you."

Mary sensed what was coming long before it arrived. She heard the abundance of rain even when there wasn't a cloud in the sky. She was walking by faith and not by sight.

And I believe it's these little rays of hope, these little thoughts of faith, that allow God to work in our lives. You don't have to have great faith. You don't have to understand all the theology and have all the answers if you will just let a little seed of God's hope take root in your heart.

Jesus said, "If you have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed." That's one of the smallest seeds, but that's all God needs to work with.

I received a letter awhile back from a lady whose neck was broken in a car accident. She had several surgeries that she hoped would improve her condition, but it grew worse. She was in constant pain. Her husband stayed home months and months to take care of her. She felt bad he'd been home that long. She finally talked him into going back to work. He reluctantly agreed.

One day while she was home alone, she was feeling depressed. She was in so much pain, she decided to end her life. She couldn't walk on her own, but she thought she could scoot out of her chair. She planned on crawling to the gun cabinet where her husband, a big hunter, kept his firearms.

But when she rose from the chair, she lost her balance and fell. She knocked over an end table and landed flat on her back, unable to move. She'd knocked the remote control for the television onto the floor and the batteries came out. As that happened, the remote changed channels on the television.

Wouldn't you know it? The channel just happened to be

one where I was ministering.

Later, this lady would recall that she had lost her faith after many years of believing her health would return. At one point she had that seed of hope. But that had been so long ago and she had been through so many setbacks, she felt like she had lost her faith.

God never gives up on us.

We may write Him off, but He never writes us off. Even when this woman didn't think God was working, her set time for deliverance was on its way. Her set time for favor was coming. She was flat on her back, unable to move. Her first thought was, Oh, great. I'm dying here and now I have to listen to this TV preacher to add to my misery.

But God works in mysterious ways. That day I was talking about how God can turn any situation around, and how He can turn your darkest hour into your brightest hour. And how nothing is too hard when we believe.

Hearing my words, this lady began to feel a peace that she'd never felt before.

"I couldn't move my body, couldn't open my eyes, but I could feel tears of joy running down my cheeks," she recalled.

Eventually, her husband came home and found her in a deep, deep sleep. After he woke her and checked her out, he made the comment, "It looks like you had an accident with the remote control."

She smiled and said, "It was no accident."

That day was a turning point. That day she began to get better. A new hope filled her heart.

My friend, God has your set times for deliverance. He has your set times for favor, your set times for increase. You may not have seen it in the past, but don't get discouraged. It's on its way. God's already lined up the right people, the right opportunities, the right breaks that you need. He has it all planned out.

When those negative thoughts come telling you that it never will change, you never will be healthy, you never will get out of that mess, just do like Elijah and learn to announce your faith in a new season of increase:

I can hear the sound of abundance. I can hear the sound of health. I can hear the sound of restoration. I can hear the sound of promotion. I may not be able to see it, but that's okay. I can sense it down inside. I know my set time for favor is coming. I know my hour of deliverance is on its way. I may have a lot of turmoil, but bottom line is, I got a feeling everything is going to be all right.

The Old Testament offers the story of Hezekiah. He had been very sick. He had something similar to what doctors now call shingles. They didn't have the medicines or antibiotics that we have today. His health was going downhill in a hurry.

Hezekiah asked Isaiah the prophet to come in and tell him what was about to happen. Isaiah said, "Hezekiah, here's the word of the Lord to you: 'Set your house in order. You

will not live. You will die."

That's not exactly the word Hezekiah was hoping for. But I love the fact that he didn't give up and accept defeat. He could have thought, God is God, and He said I will die. I guess it's over for me. But no, the Scripture says, "He turned his face toward the wall," and he began to remind God of everything good he had done.

He said, "Remember . . . how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes."

Hezekiah pleaded his case. When you're in difficult times, it's good to remind God what you've done.

"God, I kept my family in church. God, I've gone the extra mile to help others. I've given. I've served. I've been faithful."

In your own time of need you should call in all those seeds you've sown. If you have other family members, parents, grandparents, who loved God, just remind Him.

"God, my mother was a praying woman. You know that lady honored You. God, You know my grandparents. They had hearts after You."

What you're saying is, "God, we have a history with You." That's why in the Old Testament they prayed to the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. They were reminding God, "Here's how we've honored You." Every time you come to church, every time you watch a service, you are storing up mercy for you and your family. You can look back and remind God: "I went to church. I

was busy, but, God, I brought my family to church, spent the gas money, took time to honor You."

It makes a difference when you put God first in your life.

This is what Hezekiah was doing. He turned his face toward the wall and he asked God for His mercy. Before Isaiah left the temple, before he even left the building, God spoke to him again and said, "I want you to go back to Hezekiah and tell him I've changed my mind. I will not give him another year. I will not give him five years. I will not give him ten years. You tell him I will add fifteen years to his life."

My friend, God is into increase, not decrease. With our faith we can change God's mind. Think about it: One moment Hezekiah has a death sentence, not from a doctor, but from Almighty God. Then five minutes later things have shifted. God made an adjustment. Now all of sudden Hezekiah has fifteen more years of life.

What happened? Hezekiah entered into a new season, a season of increase. When did it happen? When did his set time for favor come? When he believed, when he expected God's goodness.

The Scripture says when he heard the good news, Hezekiah took off his grave clothes and he put on his praise clothes. He began to thank God that health was on its way. He thanked God for delivering him into a new season.

And I'm sure people looked at him and said, "Hezekiah, you sure look happy, but you don't look any different to

us. You still look sick. You still look weak and pale."

He likely said: "I may not look any different, I may not feel any different, but I can sense it down in here. I have a promise from Almighty God, and I know the winds have shifted in my favor."

I can imagine Hezekiah walking through the temple singing that old song, "I've got a feeling everything is gonna be alright."

People would wonder, Why is he singing? Doesn't he know he's about to die?

No, he has a different report. He knows God made an adjustment. The winds changed direction. His set time for favor had come.

Isn't it interesting that God could have added just a year? That would have been nice. God could have added five years. That would have been great. But as a God of abundance, He said, "Hezekiah, I will give you fifteen more years. I will do more than you can even ask or think."

You may have hit hard times. You may have been through the fire and flood. But God says, "Favor is coming your way."

He's making adjustments. Things are shifting. You may not see how it could happen in the natural. You may not be able to explain it. But deep down inside, the seed has taken root.

Let me declare it over you: new seasons of increase, new

seasons in your health, new seasons in your finances, new seasons in your relationships.

God is saying, "This is your set time for favor." You may have been rejected in the past, but you will be accepted in the future. You may have been pushed down in days gone by, but you will be lifted up. God will make your enemies your footstools.

You may have struggled for years, but you are about to enter into that anointing of ease. Why? This is your season. The winds have changed direction.

Do as Hezekiah did and shed your grave clothes. Get rid of that negative, defeated, not-going-to-happen mentality, and put on an attitude of faith, expectancy, praise, thanksgiving. All through the day thank God that new seasons are on their way. Thank Him that your set time for favor is here. Thank Him that your hour of deliverance has come.

If you do this, you will see the wind of God's blessings and favor blow into your life in ways you have never seen before.

CHAPTER 5

You Are Your Father's Child

Former baseball star Jesse Barfield and his wife Maria have been with our church for many years. Jesse led the Major League with forty home runs while playing for the Toronto Blue Jays. He later played for the New York Yankees where he also was known for having the strongest throwing arm in baseball.

Jesse is the most naturally talented, gifted athlete I've ever seen. Sometimes during the off-season we played basketball together. And even though that's not his main sport, he was ten times better than the rest of us. He's in his own league.

He and Maria have several children. I've watched them grow up. Their oldest son, Josh, was the star baseball player in high school. He went to college and did great. He was drafted into the minor leagues and excelled there. A few years ago he was called up to the big leagues, and now he's excelling at the highest level, playing professional baseball. Jesse's younger son, Jeremy also made the big leagues.

Statistics tell us that only one child in a million will ever make it to the big leagues. But what's interesting is, Josh's and Jeremy's success in the big leagues doesn't surprise me. I know their father. I've seen Jesse play. I've witnessed firsthand his strength, his speed, his ability to hit.

You've heard the saying, "Like father, like son." Baseball is in their DNA. Jesse's athletic skills were passed down.

I know who your father is, too. That is why I believe there is no limit to what you can do. There is no obstacle you can't overcome.

I've seen your Father's accomplishments. There's no challenge that's too much for you. Your Father always succeeds. There's no financial difficulty, no lack that will hold you back. Your Father is Jehovah Jireh. He owns it all. He's the Lord your Provider.

You have been preprogrammed to live a victorious life.

God never created us to be average. We're not supposed to drag around, barely making it, defeated and depressed. God created us to be the head and never the tail, to be happy, healthy, and whole.

The Scripture says: "We have been made in the image of Almighty God." When God made you, He put a part of Himself into you. You might say that you have the spiritual DNA of Almighty God. He's your Heavenly Father. You have some of His traits, some of His characteristics.

In your genes right now are His favor, wisdom, strength, talent, and ability. God breathed His life into you. Just as your natural DNA came from your parents, your spiritual DNA is from your Heavenly Father. The good news is that the spiritual always overrides the natural. God's DNA will override any negative DNA in your family line.

We know how certain characteristics can be passed down from our parents and from our grandparents. People say

our son Jonathan has his mother's eyes. They say he looks just like Victoria.

I always say, "Thank God. God had mercy on him."

I also see traits in our daughter, Alexandra, that are just like mine. Before she goes to bed, she lays out her clothes for the next day. She'll never go to sleep without plugging her cell phone into the battery charger. She sets her homework by the back door so she can just walk out in a hurry. Those traits were passed on to us by my mother. She is very disciplined. She inherited her self-discipline from her father. My grandfather was the same way.

How does that happen? It's in our DNA. Traits are passed from one generation to the next. Our DNA carries not just physical characteristics, but also our personality traits, our attitudes, our demeanors. These too are in our DNA. Our genetic code determines who we are. It's interesting how a gene in your DNA can be dormant for years but will activate at a specific time preprogrammed according to who your ancestors were and what's been passed down to you.

In high school I had a friend whose dad had extremely large ears. His father was one of the coaches of our baseball team. He was very good-natured about it and always making jokes about his big ears and how if he didn't have his baseball glove he could catch a fly ball with his ears. Of course, we played along and made a few jokes of our own. His dad was a gifted ball player and a great coach. His son was equally as talented. He would tell us, laughing, "I'm glad I got my dad's baseball skills and not his big ears."

After graduating from high school, I didn't see my friend for more than ten years. One day I ran into him at the mall and couldn't believe it. I thought he was his dad. His ears had grown—and grown and grown. They looked exactly like his dad's. He smiled and said, "I know what you are thinking, I shouldn't have made fun of my dad all that time." Like his father, he too was very good-natured about it.

What happened? A gene locked up in his DNA had been preprogrammed to release at a certain time. When the time came, the gene that said "Large Ears" went to work, and it did an exceptional job! Looking back in family pictures, my friend explained, you could see that it had been passed down for multiple generations.

Just as we get our natural DNA from our parents, from our natural bloodline, we get our spiritual DNA from our Heavenly Father. the Scripture tells us that before we ever showed up on planet Earth, God knew us. We're not accidents. Your parents didn't just randomly meet and decide to have a child. God had a purpose for you before your parents or grandparents even knew each other.

You have the right gifts, the right talent, the right personality, the right height. You have the courage, the strength, the ability you need. But just as with the physical, some spiritual genes lie dormant, waiting to be activated.

Every one of us has potential waiting to be released.

When Michael Jordan, another great athlete, first tried out for his School's varsity basketball team, he didn't make it. Michael was a freshman. He was still only five feet, ten

inches tall. There was only one open spot on the varsity. Another freshman who was eight inches taller won it.

At that point Michael Jordan wasn't super-coordinated and super-athletic. But there was a gene locked up in his DNA that was about to be released, a gene that would make him eight inches taller and give him an incredible ability to jump and soar through the air.

Michael Jordan could have gotten discouraged as a freshman. He could have thought: Basketball is just not for me. But something deep down on the inside kept telling him, "This is for you. You have what it takes. This is what you were born to do." His destiny was calling out to him. It was in his DNA.

Even though he went through that rejection and additional setbacks, he realized that other people didn't determine his destiny. Other people didn't know what God put in him. He kept believing. He kept being his best, kept pressing forward, and one day that gene activated. He became one of the greatest basketball players of our time.

All of us have gifts just waiting to be activated.

For thirty-five years I didn't know there was a minister in me. I didn't know I could do it. I'm naturally more quiet and reserved. I liked being behind the scenes. But when my father went to be with the Lord in 1999, one of those genes that God put in me before the foundation of time, all of a sudden it activated. All of a sudden it came alive, and deep down on the inside I knew that ministering was what I was supposed to do. Looking back, I realize this wasn't a surprise to God. He had preprogrammed the

abilities in me before I ever arrived here. All of our days have been written in His book.

For thirty-five years I didn't think I could lead a church. I'd tell Victoria, "I'm not a minister. I can't speak in public." She'd tell me time and again, "Yes, Joel. You can. One day you will pastor the church."

Still, I'd deny it: "No, Victoria. It's just not in me."

Now I know it was in my God-given DNA. That gene was lying dormant because it was not the right time. When the right season came along, all of a sudden I had a desire to step up and be a minister. I had to make a decision: Was I willing to step out of my comfort zone. Could I believe in myself as pastor? Was I fit for the calling? Or should I just sit back, play it safe, and stay right where I was, letting the opportunity pass me by?

I took that step of faith, and I really believe that's when the gene activated and I stepped into my divine destiny. Now I know I'm doing what I was born to do. I know this is one of the reasons God put me here.

Some of the genes that God preprogrammed in you are about to be activated. Like me, you will accomplish things that you never thought possible. You will see new talents, new levels of ability, new levels of wisdom and insight, new levels in your career, new levels of success. Get that down on the inside. These genes of favor, wisdom, strength, and ability will be activated.

I love to pray every day, "Father, thank you that every gene You put in me will be released to the full." You too should call forth those seeds. Speak to your genes. When

you feel intimidated, like you can't do something that you know on the inside you should do, just remind yourself: "I have the DNA of Almighty God. He breathed His life into me. I will not drag around feeling discouraged, intimidated, inferior. I know I've been equipped with everything I need. I can do all things through Christ, and I will fulfill my God-given destiny."

If you'll have that attitude and keep pressing forward, believing, expecting, then those genes of favor, increase, talent, and promotion will activate and help take you to new levels.

You have more in you. Don't you dare sit around thinking, I've reached my limits. I've had a rough upbringing, and I've made a lot of mistakes. No, the Creator of the universe has equipped you with everything you need. You have been preprogrammed to be a victor and not a victim.

I know some people were not raised in a healthy environment. But who your parents were is not a surprise to God. He's not thinking: I had a good plan for you, that your parents really messed it up.

Nor is God thinking: That first husband of yours who walked out on you, he just ruined everything.

God knew what you would encounter. He knew the people you would be dealing with. He knew the obstacles you would overcome, and so He put the right genes in you. They are already in your spiritual DNA. If you get rid of any kind of negative, defeated attitude and simply stay in faith, you will see good things released in your future—new seasons of increase, new seasons of favor. You'll look back and think, How did I get here? How did this happen?

I'll tell you how. It's in your genes. God preprogrammed it into you. All your days have been written in His book.

You might say: "Joel, I wasn't raised in a good home. I didn't have parents and other people speaking faith into me."

But that doesn't have to stop you. You may look back at your family line and see a long history of defeat, mediocrity, addictions, wrong mind-sets. You may be tempted to think: They messed my life up. Now I have to deal with all these issues.

When I met Charlie after one of our many worship tour events around the country, he told me that he grew up in a very negative environment. There was no stability in his home. He seemed to get the short end of the stick. He said, "Joel, I really feel like other people have cursed my future."

Here is the good news for Charlie and others in his situation: Before anybody could put a curse on you, God put a blessing on you. Before you even showed up on planet Earth, before you ever made it into your mother's womb, God programmed into your DNA blessing, favor, strength, ability. He's already equipped and empowered you.

You need to go back to your original state. Take on this attitude: I am a child of the Most High God. My parents may not have given me what I needed. Other people may have tried to push me down. My circumstances may not have worked out. But that will not stop me. I know I have the DNA of Almighty God. I know I have been

preprogrammed by the Creator of the universe with everything I need.

You are strong. You are talented. You are creative. You are disciplined. You are called. You are equipped. You are chosen. Get that down on the inside. Get a vision for it. Don't go around thinking about who hurt you, what you didn't get, what didn't work out. God's DNA will overcome any negative DNA.

Born poor in the segregated South, Robert J. "Bob" Brown had few advantages in life. But he had two things going for him: He was raised in the church by his grandparents, and he had his Almighty Father's DNA.

After a brief career in law enforcement, Bob opened his own public-relations firm in a small North Carolina town. That led to his working with big corporations across the country. In the 1960s, he served as a bridge between his clients and the leaders of the civil rights movement.

Later, this great-grandson of slaves served four years in the White House as a special assistant to the president of the United States. Today, he has a charity that sends millions of books to poor children in South Africa each year.

Bob Brown never knew his father. His mother left him with her parents to raise him. Yet he was preprogrammed for victory. He had the DNA of Almighty God. He was equipped with everything he needed.

Why don't you get that down on the inside, too? Tell yourself: "I have been preprogrammed for victory. I don't have to worry about my future. I have the right genes. I

don't have to wonder, Am I talented enough? Do I have what it takes? Will I be successful?"

You come from a bloodline of champions. You are not average. You are not mediocre. You have the blood of a winner—the DNA of Almighty God—and He has equipped you with everything that you need.

As children, we traveled around the country with my father on his speaking engagements. Very often we'd get preferential treatment because of his good name. People loved my dad. I could hear them whispering about us, "They are John Osteen's children."

We were in Chicago at this big hotel where my father was speaking to a group in the ballroom. I was about ten or eleven years old. I really loved the milkshakes at the hotel's coffee shop. I was walking through the lobby with my little sister April, and we stopped in front of the coffee shop to look at a picture of those milkshakes. They had an advertisement on the wall of all their bakery items.

As we were standing there, a lady came up and said, "Aren't you John Osteen's children?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am. We are."

She said, "Well, if it'd be okay with you, I want to buy you each one of those milkshakes."

I thought about her offer for two-tenths of a second. "That would be fine," I said.

She bought us milkshakes, and I knew it was because of our father. I was so proud. After that, I walked through

the lobby knowing I was something special. I was his son. For the next three days I hung out in front of that coffee shop. Anytime I saw people who halfway looked like they were attending the conference, I would stand up there and stare at that milkshake, hoping they would buy me one.

Another lady did stop one day. She said, "Aren't you John Osteen's child?"

I smiled real big, thinking: Here it comes.

"Yes, ma'am. I am!"

"Well, good," she said. "Maybe you can tell me where the ballroom is."

I was so disappointed. I pointed at the restrooms and ran off the other way.

Studies tell us that a male child usually gets his identity from his father. Maybe you weren't raised with a good father figure. Maybe you were passed from home to home and had a lot of negativity and people trying to beat you down. But that doesn't have to stop you.

Understand that you have a Heavenly Father. You have the DNA of a champion on the inside. Don't go around feeling inferior because of what someone did or didn't give you. Don't feel intimidated. You have the right genes.

You are not an accident. You are a person of destiny. There are gifts and talents in you just waiting to be released. You have potential that you've not yet tapped into. You must shake off any feelings of inferiority or low

self-esteem. Put your shoulders back. Hold your head up high. You are a child of the Most High God. You have His royal blood flowing through your veins.

What others say and do cannot stop you from fulfilling your destiny. What somebody says about you doesn't change the DNA God put in you. You have a purpose. You have a destiny that is not given to you by other people. Your destiny was handed down by Almighty God.

If you'll stay in faith, no matter what has come against you, at the right time your seeds of greatness will activate and you will fulfill your God-given destiny.

A friend of mine came from a very dysfunctional family. His father died when he was four years old. His mother made a living by working the streets. When he was eleven, his mom left him on a street corner in a large city and said she would be back soon to pick him up. Well, three days later he was still standing on that street corner waiting for his mom. He was confused and hungry, and afraid. He didn't know what to do.

Then, a man from the neighborhood saw him. He pulled his car over to find out what was going on. The young man explained the situation. The neighbor took him in.

In the natural, it didn't seem like this boy had much of a purpose, much of a future. But his neighbor spoke faith into him. He told him what I'm telling you; that you have seeds of greatness on the inside. You have been preprogrammed by the Creator of the universe not to barely get by, but to leave your mark, to make a difference.

This young man didn't realize it, but on the inside he had genes just waiting to be activated. They only needed to get in the right environment. At the right time, those genes would spring forth.

Seven or eight years later, as a teen, this young man had a strong desire to help other people who were hurting and needy like he had been. Today, that boy abandoned on a street corner is a pastor who helps thousands of people with his ministry.

Everyone has a purpose. You too have a destiny. And the good news is, your Heavenly Father has already equipped you with everything you need. You may feel like my friend did, that you have far too much to overcome. But who your parents were and how you were raised, who might have rejected you, who might have hurt you—none of those things are a surprise to God.

Nothing you've been through or ever will go through can change the DNA God put in you. Too often, we are held back because we forget who we really are—children of the Most High God.

I love my parents. I do my best to honor them. But I recognize I am not just a product of my parents. I don't have only their natural genes. I have been preprogrammed by the Creator of the universe.

Before we ever made it into our mother's womb, God had a purpose for us. He already put the right DNA, the right genes, in each one of us. Really, we don't come from our mother. We all love our mothers, but we came through our mothers. We come from Almighty God.

Nothing that our parents did or didn't do can hold us back. It may slow us down a little. It may make it a little harder, but the bottom line is this: God's DNA overrides any negative DNA.

Statistics tell us that if your father was an alcoholic, you have a ten times greater chance of becoming one yourself. If your father was hot-tempered, you have a bigger chance of becoming a hothead. If your parents lived in poverty, there's a good chance you will live in poverty. But before you accept your parents' fate as your own, you need to remind yourself of this: Before anyone could put a curse on you, God put a blessing on you. Before you received a single negative gene, God equipped you with blessing, with favor, with talent, with creativity.

You can overcome any obstacle.

Your spiritual genes are just waiting for you to believe so they can be activated. You need to get in a good environment where people are speaking faith into you. That's why I love to build people up and not tear them down. You know what I'm doing? I'm calling forth those seeds. I'm speaking to the genes that have been preprogrammed into you by the Creator of the universe.

I know when you hear words of faith and victory, something resonates on the inside. Something down in here says, "This is for me. This is who I am. This is what I was created to be." Our Spirit Person comes alive.

It's so important for you to get around people who will stir up those seeds of greatness. Don't surround yourself with naysayers. Life is too short to hang around negative, critical, cynical, skeptical, judgmental, small-minded,

jealous people . . . Did I leave out anything?

Find some dreamers, people who will build you up, people who will celebrate your victories, not people who will criticize and be jealous any time you succeed.

I am who I am today in part because Victoria spoke faith into me. I'm speaking to the genes God has put in you. I'm calling those seeds forth. I believe today can be a new beginning. I believe your dreams are being restored. Fresh vision is being released. New hope is being activated.

Your best days are not behind you, they are still out in front of you. You may have been through disappointments. You may feel that others have weighed you down or that your own poor choices have cursed your future, but remember this: Before anyone could put a curse on you, God put a blessing on you, and the blessing always overrides the curse.

Get in agreement with God.

I declare that every good thing God has put in you will come to fulfillment. Every gift, every talent, every dream, every desire will come to pass. I declare you will fulfill your purpose. You will fulfill your God-given destiny and become all He has created you to be. I declare you will overcome every obstacle. The strongholds of the past are being broken off of you. The negative things in your family line for generations will no longer affect you.

I declare that the seeds of increase, the seeds of success, the seeds of promotion are taking a new root. The DNA of Almighty God will spring forth in your life in a greater

way. You will see new seasons of increase, new seasons of God's blessings, new season of His favor.

It's your time to believe.

PART TWO

IT'S TIME FOR FAVOR

CHAPTER 6

Praying Bold Prayers

One of my most creative friends nearly didn't have the chance to share his talents with the world. His mother became pregnant with him when she was seventeen and unmarried. She was white. His father was black. This was 1971 in a small Iowa town.

The girl's parents strongly encouraged her to have an abortion. In fact, they gave her an ultimatum: Either abort the baby or get out of their home. She chose to have the baby.

Once a promising concert pianist, she ended up in San Diego, eight months' pregnant, alone and confused, battling a drug addiction.

A lady talked to her on the street one day about God's love and forgiveness. And that day, she made a decision for Christ. The lady gave her a Bible. She flipped through it, saw the name Israel time and again. She thought to herself, I will name my baby Israel. She didn't know much about God. She didn't know how to pray. But she said boldly, "God, I'm committing my little baby to You. I'm asking You to use him to do great things."

The teen mother passed her musical gifts on to her child. God took care of the rest. Her son grew up with incredible musical gifts. He could play practically any instrument. He could write songs. He could arrange music. As he grew older, he began writing worship songs that declared God's goodness. He put together his own band, and

supernatural doors opened.

Today we all know and love Israel Houghton. He is one of great worship leaders and great songwriters of our time. Israel and his band, New Breed, have won Grammy Awards and praise around the world for their uplifting music.

That's what happens when you pray bold prayers. Israel could have become a statistic. He could have just foundered, never finding his purpose. But I believe that because this mother dared pray a bold prayer, his life was set on an extraordinary path.

It's time for favor.

God wants to bless you. He wants to enlarge your territory. Will you be bold enough to ask Him each day for more influence? Ask God to help you be a bigger blessing. That's not a selfish request. The Scripture says: "You have not because you ask not."

If we are to see the full blossoming of His favor, we have to learn to pray bold prayers. Many times we think we're not supposed to ask for too much. After all, we don't want to appear greedy or selfish. Some tell me, "Joel, if God wants me to be blessed, He'll bless me. He's God."

But that's not the way it works. God expects us to ask. If you are not asking for God's favor, His blessings, His increase, then you are not releasing your faith.

There are those who do ask, but they pray such small prayers. "God, if You'll just give me a fifty-cent raise." You'd better be careful with those small prayers. You

might get what you ask for! Is that truly what you want? "God, I've changed my mind. Give me that twenty-dollar raise instead! That's more like it!"

Other times you might ask: "God, if You will just help my marriage survive." Or "God, just help me make ends meet this month." Or "God, help my child stay in school." You must be bolder than that! Dare to pray: "God, I'm asking You not to just supply my needs but to bless me so much that I can be a blessing to others!"

Supersize your prayers.

"God, I'm asking that our marriage not just survive, but that we grow happier and more fulfilled than ever before!"

"God, I'm asking that my child become 'mighty in the land,' a leader and fulfilled of his God-given destiny!" Jesus put it this way: "According to your faith it will be done unto you." That means if you pray for a little, you will receive a little. But if you can learn to pray bold prayers, and big prayers, and expect big, and believe big, God will do big things in your life.

The Scripture says in Psalm 2:8: "Ask Me and I will give you the nations as your inheritance."

God wants you to ask Him for big things. Ask Him for those hidden dreams planted in your heart. Ask Him even for the unborn promises that might otherwise never come to pass in the natural. Ask him to restore your broken ties to family members and other loved ones. Ask him for a life free of illness. Ask him for a full blossoming of your talents.

Ask Him to fulfill your highest hopes and dreams.

Jamie was seven years old and living on her family's farm when she told her dad that she dreamed of having her own little calf. As it happened, one of their cows was about to give birth, but Jamie's father had already decided not to keep any more cows. He planned on selling this calf and any others that came along.

But for some reason little Jamie really wanted to keep this calf. She pleaded and pleaded with her dad day after day, "Please, Daddy, let me keep this cow. Please make an exception, just one more cow for me."

After a couple of weeks she wore her father down, and he finally said, "Okay, Jamie, I'll make a deal with you. If the cow is black, you can keep it, but if it's spotted or brown like the rest of our cows, then we'll get rid of it."

Jamie agreed. Then, she started praying and asking God for that cow to be born black. Every night before she went to bed, she said, "God, thank you that this little calf will be as black as can be and there won't be any doubt that it's mine."

That's uncommon faith. Most of us adults would never pray anything like that. We would think that's far out. That's radical. That's extreme.

But I've found that radical faith gets radical results. Extreme faith gets extreme results. A few weeks later this little calf was born. It was black, and right between its eyes there was a white patch that formed a big J.

It was as if God put a big stamp on it, to mark that calf as Jamie's.

When you release your faith in uncommon ways, you'll see God do uncommon things. Some people never ask God for their dreams. Maybe you've asked for everyone else's, but you need to ask for what God has put in your heart. And in your quiet time, when it's just between you and God, dare to ask Him for your deepest hopes, your greatest dreams.

It may be something that seems impossible, but just be honest and say, "God, I don't see how this could ever happen, but I have a dream to go back to college, to start my own business, to get married and have a family."

Dare to ask God for your greatest dreams and desires.

Don't settle for a lesser dream. Deep down you may have a desire to become an author, to break an addiction, to serve the needy in another country. But you may feel it could never happen. You may have been through disappointments. Maybe you've been praying for a long time and nothing has happened. Now, you've lost your enthusiasm so you're praying what I call "survival prayers."

God, just help me make it through the day.

Lord, help me deal with the boss tomorrow.

God, please make sure I don't get another speeding ticket. There is nothing wrong with those prayers. But they are like asking the world's greatest surgeon to put a Band-Aid

on your broken leg. The surgeon can do much, much more for you, if you would only have faith and ask for the very best treatment.

You have to fire up again. Ask God for those bold dreams and desires you've let go of. He can still bring them to pass. Remember, when you ask Him, you are releasing your faith. Scripture says in Ephesians that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we can ask or think.

My friend Tom's daughter Shari was about three years old when something sharp fell on her hand and she lost the tips of two fingers. They rushed her to the emergency room and after they stopped the bleeding, a plastic surgeon examined Shari's fingers.

"I'm sorry," he told Tom. "There's nothing we can do to restore her fingers back to normal. She'll never have nails on those two fingers and they'll always be a little shorter."

The bones were severed. All they could do was a skin graft to try to make them look as smooth as possible, the surgeon said.

Tom was very respectful, but he told the doctor: "I believe that God can restore my little girl's fingers and make them normal again."

The surgeon, who'd grown up in another country without religion in his life, said, "That's fine if you want to believe it, but understand the bone is missing. They will never be the right length, and for sure she won't have fingernails."

Tom didn't argue, but he stuck with his beliefs.

When his wife Ruth came in, the doctor pulled her aside and said, "Your husband is in shock. He won't accept the fact that the tips of her fingers are permanently damaged."

The surgeon did the skin graft. Six weeks later they brought Shari back to check her fingers. When the doctor took off the bandages his first words were "Oh my God."

Alarmed, Tom said, "What's wrong?"

"The fingernails grew back," the surgeon said. "It looks like the fingers are the exact right length."

That was over twenty years ago. To this day, Shari's fingers look perfectly normal. Her story always reminds me that we should never be afraid to ask God for uncommon blessings. I respect medical experts. But there is another expert who breathed life into us ill. God made your body. He holds your world in His hand. He controls the universe.

Just as He can hold back the rain, He can heal a child. Just as He can cause a cow to have a big J between its eyes, He can bring your dreams to pass. He can help you overcome your obstacles.

My question to you is, "Are you asking?" And if so, are you asking for enough? Are you putting your faith out there so it's activating God's power? Or are you just praying these barely-get-by prayers?

I hear people say, "I don't want to bother God. He has bigger things to deal with than me."

It may surprise you to learn that you are God's biggest deal. You are the apple of His eye. You are His most prized possession. He's longing to be good to you.

Be bold.

Dare to ask God for bigger things.

My father used to tell a story that Bruce Wilkinson used in a slightly different form in *The Prayer of Jabez*. Dad would encourage his church members to imagine a huge warehouse in Heaven run by Saint Peter, the keeper of the keys. As you walk down the halls, you see thousands and thousands of doors with names on them. Finally, you come to a door with your name on the plaque. That gets your attention. You halt and say to Saint Peter, "What is in there?"

He tries to downplay it, "Ah, nothing. You don't want to go in there."

"Sure I do," you insist. "My name is on the door."

After debating for a few minutes, you finally convince Saint Peter to let you go in. He opens the door. Inside you see row after row of boxes on shelves. You hurry over to open up one, and then the realization comes: These are blessings that belong to me but have never been released!

The first is a box of favor that God wanted you to have last week. But you never asked.

The next is a big break that God prepared for you last month. But you forgot to ask for it.

Down the row, there is a box containing the book you wanted to write but gave up on. Beside it is the business you wanted to create. Then there is one containing the healing God planned for you.

Row after row of blessings, favors, good breaks, good ideas.

They all belong to you, but God never released them because you never asked.

I don't know about you, but I want to make sure my warehouse is completely empty. I don't want to be greedy. I don't want to be selfish. I simply want all that belongs to me. I want to be everything God has created me to be. I want to have everything God intended for me to have.

Ask so that you may receive.

Think of it this way: What if God had five blessings in store for you last week but you missed out because you were not praying boldly to Him?

A big break?

A good idea?

A profitable opportunity?

A person who'll change your life?

A chance to benefit others with your talents?

Those potential blessings are still stored in your heavenly warehouse. Only bold prayers will open the door to them.

You may be so kindhearted and generous that you always pray for others, but you never ask God to fulfill your own dreams. It is good to help others. But every morning after you thank God for what He's done, after you thank Him for His goodness in your life, you should get in the habit of saying: "God, I'm asking for Your favor today. I'm asking for supernatural opportunities, God, that You'd bring every dream, every desire, that You'd bring that fulfillment."

Have you ever dared to ask God to help you own your home free and clear without monthly payments? That is a bold prayer, isn't it? If we're not careful, bold prayers can make our minds go Tilt! Tilt! Tilt!

You might say, "Joel, I will never pay off my house. That would take me thirty years."

Again, you are praying too small. You need a bigger vision, a bolder prayer: "God, I'm asking to be debt-free—my home, my car, my business, my credit cards!"

Pray boldly so that you stretch your faith. After all, if we could accomplish all of our dreams on our own, we would not need God's help. That is why we need to ask for things that are so big, so grand, that you know they will require God's blessing and His favor to bring them to pass.

Pray for extraordinary things so big you know they will require God's blessing: "God, help me so that I can pay off my home and buy one for my mother!"

TILT! TILT!

You may say that is impossible. "Joel, do you know where I

work?"

But if you believe, all things are possible. We serve a far-out God. One touch of His favor can take you to a new level!

God is longing to be good to you, but you must be bold enough to ask for his goodness. I'm not talking about being selfish or living "me-minded." If you ask only for your own blessings, your prayers are out of balance. But I know people who have the attitude: My needs are supplied. I'm blessed. I don't want to bother God by asking Him for anything else for me and my family.

Really, though, that too is a selfish way to think. You are not supposed to have just your needs supplied. Why not ask that God bless you in such a way that you can support orphanages, build clinics for the needy, or help that single mom down the street?

When your needs are supplied, keep stretching to bless others.

I know a young man who grew up in the African nation once known as Zaire but now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo. My friend was the seventh of ten siblings. They shared their home with several cousins and other relatives. His father was head of the school system in the capital city, where one in four people lived in poverty.

My friend, who once dreamed of becoming a doctor, grew up aware that many people were dying in his country because of inadequate medical care. Often, children and adults died from health problems that were easily

treatable if only they'd been somewhere with up-to-date medical care.

As a young boy, his heart was stirred. He couldn't stand seeing the suffering and sadness of his people. God put a dream in his heart. One day, somehow, somehow, he would return to make things better. But how could that be possible? He was just one small boy.

Still, there was something different about this intelligent, athletic young man. He had no fear of praying bold prayers. Even as a little boy, he said, "God, help me to help my people. God, give me a way to bring this dream to pass."

Our far-out God took an unusual approach in my friend's case. Since he was an intelligent child, you might expect that God would have gone with the boy's game plan and helped him become a doctor.

Instead, God took this growing boy and just kept growing him. Taller and taller and taller. And taller still!

He grew so much that his father encouraged him to give up soccer for basketball. He struggled at first because his coordination could not keep up with his height. Though he was seven feet, two inches tall, he went to Georgetown University on an academic rather than an athletic scholarship. That was unheard of—a supernatural break.

He planned to study medicine so he could go back and help his people. But during his second year the basketball coach, John Thompson, asked him to try out for the team. He not only made the squad, but he also became a star player. Later, he was drafted in the first round by the

Denver Nuggets of the NBA.

Dikembe Mutombo, who later joined the Houston Rockets and attends our church, became one of the greatest defensive players in NBA history. He did not become a doctor, but he never gave up on his bold dream.

The critical need for better medical care in his native country was brought home to him once again when his mother died of a stroke in 1997. Ten years later, Mutombo opened a research and teaching hospital in his African hometown. He donated \$15 million and raised millions more to build it. Then he named it after his mother, who taught him to always dream big.

God has a way to bring your dreams to pass if you'll dare be bold enough to ask. If God did it for Deke Mutombo, He can do it for you. What is it that God has put in your heart? Are you asking? Are you believing?

Are you stretching your faith?

In the Old Testament story of Jabez (1 Chronicles 4: 9-10), we learn that his name meant, "pain, suffering, trouble" and "heartache." Unfortunately, the name suited him all too well. You see, in those ancient times, a person's name was much more significant than it is today. People tended to take on the traits of their given names. For instance, "Jacob" means "deceiver." And if you study the Bible, you'll find that Jacob cheated and deceived people.

On the other hand, the name "Joshua" means "savior." I'm sure courage and hope filled his heart because Joshua knew he was called to deliver God's people.

Knowing that, consider how Jabez must have felt. Every time someone said, "Hey, Jabez," they were saying, "Hey, trouble. Hey, sorrow. Hey, pain."

They were prophesying more defeat and failure. We don't know why Jabez's parents named him this. Maybe it was because the father abandoned the mother. Maybe she was so hurt and so angry she named him that. Maybe she had a difficult pregnancy or childbirth with him so she named him "pain, heartache, trouble."

You can imagine what Jabez had to put up with in school. The other kids probably gave him a hard time.

"Hey, there's Jabez. Here comes trouble."

"What's up with you, man? Why would your parents name you that?"

His name could have put limits on his life. It could have affected his self-image and made him feel insecure and inferior. But the Scripture says Jabez was more honorable than any others in his family. It doesn't tell us much about him except one little prayer he prayed. From this prayer, we can see there was something special about Jabez. In spite of his rough upbringing, in spite of his self-image constantly being attacked, Jabez looked up to the heavens and said, "God, I'm asking that You would bless me indeed."

Think of the nerve of that prayer. He said: "God, I've had a lot of things come against me. Life hasn't treated me fairly. I'm off to a rough start. But, God, I know You're a good God. I know You have a great plan for my life. So I'm asking You to bless me indeed."

Notice the indeed. It's significant. He wasn't saying, "God, I'm asking You to bless me a little bit. Bless me average. Bless me ordinary." No, Jabez said, "God, I'm asking for abundance. I'm asking for overflow. Bless me indeed." Jabez asked for abundance. He asked for overflow. Bless me indeed'.

Do you see his boldness? What right did he have to pray that prayer? He was supposed to be destined for heartache, pain, trouble. He was supposed to live defeated and depressed. But old Jabez shook off that defeated mentality. He said in effect, "It doesn't matter what someone has named me. It doesn't matter what it looks like in the natural. I know who I am. I'm a child of the Most High God, and my destiny is to be blessed."

Jabez went on to say not only "bless me," but also "God, enlarge my territory." He was saying, "God, go beyond the norm. Go beyond my borders. Give me extraordinary favor. God, let me see abundance in my life."

The last thing we hear from Jabez is found at the end of verse 10. Surely, God would say, "Jabez, would you quit bothering me? Do you know what your name means? You will not be blessed. Your own parents said you're headed for trouble and heartache."

Instead, the verse says simply: "And God granted him his request."

That is the kind of God we serve. If you pray bold prayers, God will do bold things in your life. You may have had a rough beginning. Maybe you weren't treated fairly either. You've had some setbacks. But if Jabez were here today,

he would tell you: "Don't settle for where you are. If you'll dare ask, God will bless you indeed."

If the psalmist David were around today, he would say, "God can lift you out of that low place. He can put a new song in your heart. He can put a spring back in your step. He can set you on high."

Maybe you've made mistakes, poor choices. You feel like you're washed up or that you are supposed to just endure life. But God is saying, "If you'll ask, I'll give you a new beginning."

Maybe you've been hurt in a relationship. Somebody did you wrong, and it didn't work out. Now you think you'll never really be happy. Why don't you be bold like Jabez and say, "God, I know it looks like it's over. It looks like my best days are behind me. But I believe you are a far-out God. So I'm asking You to bring somebody great into my life, the perfect person for me."

No matter what's come against you, if you'll be bold enough to ask, the rest of your life can be better than ever before. When you awaken each day and say the prayer of Jabez, "God, bless me indeed. Enlarge my territory," you are off on the right foot.

His prayer says: "God, I know You love me. I know good things are in store for me. So I'm asking today for Your favor, for Your increase, for Your blessings in my life." That is not being selfish. That's showing God that you're depending on Him. Maybe you are asking God to bless you, but you have neglected to add the "indeed." You need a bigger vision.

"God, I'm asking You to bless me in unusual ways; not average, not ordinary. God, I'm asking for supernatural increase."

I pray every day for God's unprecedented favor. That's favor like we've never seen before. I've learned not to pray small prayers. They set limits.

You may be living in a little apartment today, but deep down something on the inside says, "I'm made for more than this. I'm supposed to own my own home."

Dare to ask.

Maybe you're struggling in your health and you could easily learn to live with it. But deep down inside something says, "I'm supposed to be well. I'm supposed to be free from this pain."

Dare to ask.

Or maybe you have a good job. But in your heart of hearts you know one day you're supposed to own your own business. Don't settle where you are. Every day just say, "Father, I'm asking for supernatural opportunities. God, give me ways to bring this dream to pass."

It may not happen overnight, but stay in faith. Scripture says to ask and keep on asking. Knock and keep on knocking. If we have to ask for twenty or thirty years, we should keep asking, keep believing, keep hoping on in faith.

Proverbs 28:1 says: "The righteous are as bold as a lion."

Keep your faith flowing even when there is no hope in sight. Dare to dream big and pray boldly, especially—yes, especially— when there is no hope in sight!

If you don't believe me, believe Amber Wells. She is a frequent flyer and a frequent prayer. Amber has a ritual on every flight. As the airplane is taking off, Amber counts off the first 120 seconds. She read that once a plane has been in the air for two minutes on takeoff, most typical problems have been avoided.

But on a flight in early 2009, Amber only made it to 90 seconds in her count when something went terribly wrong. She heard a loud explosion, and then, from her seat in the twentieth row, she saw a fireball come out of the plane's engine.

Amber then noticed that the pilot had begun to slowly turn the plane, as if heading back toward the airport. But then, he said over the loudspeaker: "Brace for impact, brace for impact."

After that announcement, everyone around Amber began praying softly. She held on to the cross on her necklace, closed her eyes, and joined them.

Amber prayed: "Lord, guide the hand of this pilot. Let us be safe. Watch over us. Protect us."

The next thing she knew, she was standing knee deep in water. She looked out the window and saw that her plane was no longer in the air. She was surrounded by water.

You know what happened from there. Amber Wells and everyone else on her US Airways Flight 1549 plane made

it to safety. Amber told a reporter later that the 155 people who survived the emergency landing "are living proof of God's grace, because we wouldn't be here without Him."

They are also impressive evidence that even in the darkest of moments you should dare to pray bold prayers.

CHAPTER 7

Thriving, Not Just Surviving

Do you know what General Electric, Hewlett Packard, IBM, and Microsoft have in common? All of these innovative American corporations originated during a severe economic downturn or a depression.

Challenging times have served as catalysts for creativity, innovation, and accomplishment throughout human history. Yet when times grow tough and things aren't going our way, it's tempting to just hunker down. Thoughts of increase and moving forward are put on hold.

News reports of a sinking economy or personal problems of our own can tempt us to think: If I can just hold on, maybe I can make it through another day, another month, another year. If we're not careful, we develop this survival mentality. We stop releasing our faith. We stop believing we can rise any higher. We just try to maintain the status quo, to keep our heads above water, to break even.

But we're not supposed to break even. We're supposed to break through to a new level, to more of God's favor, to increase, to promotion.

I've known people who have been through tough times—maybe a relationship didn't work out, or they experienced some kind of disappointment—and even though things improved, they never stopped thinking of themselves as survivors. I saw a guy wearing a T-shirt that said, "I

survived Hurricane Katrina." I wanted to congratulate him for surviving one of history's worst storms, but then I wanted to tell him that you can't stay in survival mode'. You can't always be the victim: I just have to hold on. No, you are not just a survivor. You are more than a conqueror.

I realize some seasons are more difficult. Not every season is harvest. Sometimes we go through trying times where it seems like things are drying up and getting a little more challenging. Part of the problem is that we've heard so many stories about victims and survivors. Yet there are conquerors in every situation. Even in Hurricane Katrina, there were heroes.

High school principal Elmer Mullins and sheriff's captain Windy Swetman Jr. were in charge of a storm shelter during Hurricane Katrina. Nearly three hundred people came to their high school near Biloxi, Mississippi. They called it "a shelter of last resort" because it was in a flood plain. People went there only if they had nowhere else to go.

Some of them swam in. Others couldn't make it. The principal and the sheriff had to go out in a school bus, in the middle of the storm, to rescue three deputies and their two police dogs caught in floodwaters.

They didn't just hunker down. They didn't just hang on. They didn't just survive. They went out and conquered that storm.

A scripture in Jeremiah says if we'll give the Lord our trust and confidence, God will prosper us even in the desert. He'll prosper us even in difficult times. That

means when others are going under, God says you will go over.

When other people are losing clients and business is slow, God is bringing you new clients. When companies are laying off employees, God is opening up supernatural doors for you. When others are pulling back, worried and afraid, you are pushing forward in faith, believing, expecting good things.

That is what it means to have a thriving mentality. Deep down we know that even when we're in the desert, even when things are slow financially, even when we get a negative report, God is still on the throne. Our job is not our source. The economy is not our source. We know God is our source.

It's time for favor.

In one sense, it doesn't really matter what the stock market does or doesn't do. It doesn't matter how high the price of gas goes. God always has the final say. If hard times hit, God can still bless you in a greater way.

"I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor His seed begging bread," David says in the Psalms. And Matthew 6:33 promises that if you seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, all essential things "shall be added unto you."

Still, sometimes we get talked into thinking like survivors. We see so many negative news reports, we begin to worry: It's so bad. How will I make it?

No. I want to talk you into thriving and not just surviving.

I realize we need to be wise and use the wisdom God has given us, but I don't believe you are supposed to pull back and not pursue your dreams, not expect increase, not believe in favor, or just try to hold on. That is a survival mentality.

Times may become difficult. You may wonder how things will work out. But remember this: As God took the five loaves and the two fish and multiplied them to feed thousands of people, He can multiply what you have.

God can multiply your time and help you to get more done. He can multiply your wisdom and help you make better decisions. He can multiply your finances so your money goes further. God is in complete control.

When tough times hit, don't hunker down and think: Oh, it's so bad. I just have to hold on and try to make it through. No, dig in your heels and say: "I will not just survive. I will thrive. I will prosper in spite of this difficulty."

A young lady told me she divorced her husband after years of struggling in their marriage. She had done her best to keep it together, but it just didn't work out.

"At least now I'm surviving," she said.

She was happy that she made it through, but I could tell the wind was out of her sails. This beautiful girl had lost the sparkle in her eyes. I told her it was good that she'd put the bad marriage behind her, but I added, "Now, you must leave that survival mentality behind you, too. God has new seasons in front of you. He has new doors He wants to open. He wants the next part of your life to be

better than the first part. But you can't make the mistake of just settling and thinking I've been through so much. I'm just glad to be where I am."

A survival mentality will keep you from God's best. You must shake it off. Pray for God's help: You promised that what was meant for my harm You would use to my advantage. I may have been through the fire, through the famine, through the flood, but I know it's my time for favor. It's my time to see more of Your goodness in my life.

Make up your mind that no matter what comes your way, no matter how difficult, no matter how unfair, you will do more than simply survive. You will thrive in spite of it.

Bad news may come. The economy may drop. Your health and relationships can hit hard times.

The good news is that no matter what happens to us, God is still on the throne! There are no recessions in heaven. God does not cut back because of high gas prices. He's never short on food and water.

I am happy to report that all is well in His kingdom. Here is the key: As long as our Source is okay, we will be okay. If we stay connected to the vine, keeping God first, believing and expecting His favor, then as His branches, we will not just survive, we will thrive!

Still, you have to keep your faith out there. Negative voices will try to steal your dreams and talk you into settling for life as it is. If you let those words take root, you will be stuck in survival mode. If you expect less, you will get less. I want you to expect more. Expect that God will increase you in a greater way. Expect this to be your

best year ever!

Really, it's not that impressive to be blessed and promoted when the economy is strong, business is great, and everybody around you is being blessed. Some might say you are just benefiting from a strong economy and good times, but when times are tough and the news is dark and still God shows up and does something extraordinary—that is a great testimony to the faithfulness of our God. When God prospers you in the desert and people see you increasing even though they're stuck, that's when they'll know it makes a difference to serve the Most High God.

My father had a friend who was a very successful orange grower in Florida. He owned hundreds and hundreds of acres of groves. One winter forecasters predicted a hard freeze would hit. Such cold was rare for his part of the state. He and other growers feared a freeze would destroy their orange trees and wipe out their businesses.

Still, this grower was a man of great faith. He believed God could do anything. Just before the freeze, he went into his grove and marched around his trees, praying out loud: "God, I'm asking You to protect my crops and keep them from freezing." His friends and fellow growers thought he was behaving strangely. But later they wondered if he knew something they didn't.

The big freeze lasted more than twenty-four hours. Other growers worried the whole time that their crops would be destroyed. Our friend just kept thanking God for protecting his crops.

When the freeze ended, the groves all around his were destroyed. Every tree was dead. But his groves were

untouched. Big healthy oranges hung on his trees. It looked like God had put a big blanket over his property.

The other growers were amazed. Those who'd made fun of him for praying in his groves said: "Next time, pray for our crops, too!"

God is well able to take care of us. He can prosper us even in the desert if we'll just be bold enough to believe.

Scripture says: "No weapon that is formed against you will prosper." Disappointments and setbacks will come. But you don't have to get down and go into survival mode. Stay in faith and believe that God will protect you supernaturally. Believe that you will see His unprecedented favor.

Maybe you are trying to sell your house in a neighborhood where all others are going unsold for months. Why don't you be bold like the orange grower? Believe for favor. March around your property and pray: "God, I know I'm not supposed to simply survive. I'm supposed to thrive. So I'm asking that Your favor would cause my house to stand out."

Maybe business is slow. Others in your market are struggling. Why not thank God for bringing you new clients, giving you new opportunities, opening up supernatural doors?

Instead of getting discouraged and thinking, Oh, man, the bad economy will hit me hard. My business will probably go down, try thanking our Father for bringing you the best year ever! You might as well get ready for promotion, for divine connections, for supernatural breaks, to have

your best year so far, to thrive, and not just survive.

You might wonder: Does giving thanks really bring favor? My sister Lisa and her husband Kevin found a new house that met their needs, so they decided to sell theirs. Most homes in their neighborhood were taking three months to a year to sell. They prayed and asked God for His help. On the first day their house went on the market, a woman called and said she wanted to buy it. Not only that, she said, "If you'll take it off the market right now, I'll pay you more than you have it listed for."

That is unprecedented favor. A bad economy does not limit God's power. What goes on around us does not limit Him. God is limited only by our thinking. That is why it is so important that we don't fall into survival mode and start thinking, My business can't expand. The economy is too slow. I'll never sell my house because no others are selling. I'll never get a promotion when the business is cutting back.

God likes to show up and show out in hard times. He likes to do the extraordinary because it brings Him more honor. When we spread the good news of what God has done—I had my best year in a bad year. I sold my house when no others were selling. My crops survived the killing frost—our words bring God more honor than just bragging about His goodness.

Get ready for God to show up and show in in your life in a greater way. God wants to do the extraordinary. He wants to make you an example of his goodness.

If you believe to barely get by, you will barely get by.

If you believe that you will have a tough year, your faith will draw that in. So I encourage you to believe that you are blessed—not that you will be blessed—but that you are already blessed. Believe God's favor surrounds you in a greater way.

You may say: "Joel, I don't really feel blessed. I don't feel like I have favor. I never get any good breaks." This is what faith is all about. You must believe it before you see it. You need to act like you're blessed, talk like you're blessed, think like you're blessed, dress like you're blessed, walk like you're blessed, treat people like you're blessed.

That's your faith at work. You will draw in the goodness and favor of God. And that's a whole lot better than fretting that the value of your home dropped \$10,000 overnight, or that your company is downsizing, or that the price of groceries has gone through the roof.

Don't dwell on your problems. If you have a poor mouth, you will have a poor life. Jobs may be disappearing, but you are still connected to the Vine. A relationship may fall apart, but God is still on the throne. You may not see a way out because your resources are limited, but God owns it all. Stay in faith. Make the decision that you will thrive, not merely survive.

Psychologists and researchers who study "hope theory" have found that focusing on solutions increases our capacity to reach our goals while lifting our spirits in the process.

I met a couple who had lost everything in Hurricane Katrina. They moved to Houston and found temporary

housing. When I spoke with them, I could tell they were still in survival mode. They could not see beyond their temporary situation to a new and better life. They were just grateful to be making it though another day, another month. I felt a need to jump-start their faith. I reminded them that God has promised to pay back double for every unfair thing that happens to us.

God said He would make us better off than we were before, but first we have to shake off the survival mentality. Get in agreement with God. Focus forward and say: "It's payback time. I know my God is a God of restoration, and I believe it's my time for favor. I may be in the desert right now, but I know God can prosper me even there. I know if God is for me, who would dare be against me?"

Understand that as a child of the Most High God, as long as you are walking in His ways, you have the blessing of God on your life. Wherever you go, His blessings go. You can be out in the desert and God will cause you to be blessed. You can be working at an office with negative people, with people who complain constantly, but when you get there, the blessing gets there. Really, your company should be glad to have you because you bring the blessing. You bring God's favor.

Abraham and his nephew Lot moved with all of their family and all their flocks and herds to a new land. They soon realized that the land they settled was not fertile enough to support both their families with crops. Abraham, being the bigger person, told Lot: "You choose wherever you want to live and I'll go in a different direction."

Lot chose the best part of the land. He chose an area of lush green pastures, beautiful ponds, rolling hills. It looked like a postcard. Abraham was left with barren desert: rocks and sand, dry and desolate.

I'm sure at first Abraham was tempted to think: Man, if I can just survive out here. God, how will I make it? There's not enough water, not enough supplies. How will this ever work out?

Abraham understood this principle. He knew that as long as he was being his best, as long as He was honoring God, then wherever he went, the blessing of God went. He knew that even though he was in the desert, even though there were not enough supplies in the natural, God could still lead him to prosper—not just to survive, but to have more than enough.

It wasn't long before that desert around Abraham turned into an oasis. His crops and his herds multiplied so much, the Scripture says, that Abraham became the wealthiest man in the East.

Meanwhile, Lot was not walking in God's ways. He did not have God's favor. His land began to dry up. Abraham had to rescue Lot and his family. The story of Abraham and Lot tells me that when people do us wrong, when someone cheats you out of a promotion, someone plays politics to get the position you should have, don't worry about it. Where you are is where the blessing will be. You can be stranded on a deserted, remote island, but you will be blessed because when you arrived, the blessing arrived too.

This is what happened to Joseph in the Scriptures.

Everywhere they put him, he just kept rising to the top. His brothers threw him into a pit and then sold him into slavery to Potiphar, captain of the pharaoh's bodyguards. Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his household. Joseph was falsely accused and put in prison. The officials put him in charge of the whole prison. He stood before the pharaoh and was able to interpret his dreams. The grateful pharaoh put him in charge of the whole country.

You cannot keep a good person down. When you honor God with your life, when you're a person of excellence and integrity, you have the blessing of God. Wherever you go, just like cream, you will rise to the top. Hold your head high—not in arrogance, but in confidence, knowing that wherever you go, you're taking along something very special. Whether you're at work, in the grocery store, or at the ballpark, just remind yourself: When I got here, the blessing got here!

God wants us to be so blessed that when other people see us, they will want what we have. Back in the days when they prayed to the God of Abraham, the attitude was, "Abraham has so much favor. He's so kind, so generous, so peaceful, so blessed. If we can just reach his God, we know that everything will be all right."

That's what I want people to say about you and me: "If we can just get their God, then everything will work out!"

Like Abraham, you may not be in a perfect place today. You may not have a perfect marriage, a perfect job, or a perfect neighborhood. But remember, your location does not determine the blessing. Other people don't determine your favor. God does. And the fact is, when you arrived, so did the blessing. You may not always feel like it. That's

why it is so important that you continually remind yourself: I am blessed. Goodness and mercy are following me right now. God's favor is surrounding me like a shield. He prospers me even in the desert.

You may have been in the survival mode for a long, long time. If you will get in agreement with God, I'll just declare that your days of survival are over and your days of thriving have begun. I want you to go in faith knowing that God has great things in your future.

Recently, one of our church members told me he'd encountered some rough going. Then he said, "But, Joel, I'm too blessed to be stressed." I like that. That's the way we need to be. "I'm too blessed to be worried. I'm too blessed to be negative. I'm too blessed to be upset. I've seen God do too many great things."

Psalm 1:3 says if we keep God first, we'll be like a tree planted by the waters. Our leaves will not wither. The Message translation says: "You're a tree replanted in Eden . . . always in blossom." I believe you are such a person. I believe people of faith are continually in bloom. People who smile when they could be complaining. People who sing a song of praise even when times are tough.

Why is that? Because deep down you know that everywhere you go, you are blessed by God. Make that decision with me. You're not pulling back, hunkering down, or just holding on. Dig your heels in and say, "I am not just surviving. This is my year to thrive."

If you'll do this, God will amaze you with His goodness. You will be a person who is always in blossom.

CHAPTER 8

Choosing Faith Over Fear

We took our son Jonathan to a restaurant when he was only a few months old. I was holding him as we ate quietly. This friendly couple came up and complimented Victoria and me on our well-behaved child. We had a nice conversation with them, but then the husband left us with this:

"You just wait till he gets to be about two years old," he warned. "It's like he'll turn into a different person. He's good now, but those terrible twos are coming."

I was tempted to say, "Thank you so much for your encouragement."

Boy, that really lifted my spirits!

Actually, I told Victoria that I refused to accept some stranger's prediction for our son.

"I am not receiving that," I said. "It will not be the terrible twos for us. It will be the terrific twos."

And I'm here to tell you that we didn't have a problem with Jonathan when he was two or three or four.

Then when he was about ten years old, the naysayers started in again: "Just wait till he gets to be a teenager. He'll be giving you problems then. You'll have some headaches."

Jonathan has been a teenager for a couple of years now. Do you know he still hasn't cursed or thrown tantrums? He still hasn't gotten rebellious. He's just as kind and respectful as he's always been.

Next thing people will say, "Well, just wait till he turns eighteen and gets out on his own. Wait till he hits forty. Joel, watch out because when your son gets to be seventy-five ..."

No, I've made up my mind. I'm not activating my fears. Instead, I'm activating my faith.

We're not expecting our children to cause us problems. We're expecting them to excel. We're expecting them to do great things with their lives. Your own children will rise to the level of your expectations. If you expect them to give you trouble, cause you headaches, and not amount to much, you're allowing that to come to pass because you're putting your faith in your fears.

Do not put your faith in your fears!

Every day, all through the day, you have choices. You can believe that God is in control, believe that He's taking care of you and believe that good things are in store. Or you can go around worried, expecting the worst, wondering if you will make it.

I often hear fearful people say things like:

"I'm afraid I'll lose my job."

"I doubt this marriage will last."

"I just know my son will fall in with the wrong crowd."

They don't realize it, but their words show they're choosing fear over faith.

Fear and faith may seem like opposites, but they have something in common. Both ask us to believe something that we cannot see.

Fear says: Believe the negative. That pain in your side? That's the same thing your grandmother died from. It will probably be the end of you.

Faith says: "Believe the positive." That illness is not permanent. It's only temporary.

Fear says: "Business is slow. You will go under."

Faith says: "God is supplying all of your needs."

Fear says: "You've been through too much. You'll never be happy."

Faith says: "Your best days are still out in front of you."

Here's the key: What you meditate on takes root. If you go around all day thinking about your fears, and you play those fears out over and over again in your mind, they will become your reality.

That's what Job warned of when he said, "The thing I feared came upon me."

A friend told me recently that everything was going great

in his life. He had become engaged. His business was blessed. But instead of enjoying it, instead of thanking God for it, he said, "Joel, I'm afraid it will not last. I'm afraid it's too good to be true."

When you buy into fears, you draw in the negative. You help those fears come to pass. Negative thoughts may come to you, saying things like: "You're doing well, but get ready. It will come to an end." Do not allow them to take root.

Switch over into faith and pray: "Father, You said Your favor will last for a lifetime. You said goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life."

Choose faith over fear.

None of us is immune to fear. A while back, I was facing a potentially bad situation. It had gone on for months and months. Every morning, the dread and fear hit me first thing: "This will not work out. It will cause a lot of heartache. You might as well plan for defeat."

Fear will try to dominate your thoughts. If you allow it, fear will keep you awake at night. Fear will steal your joy, steal your enthusiasm. Those fears followed me around like a dark cloud. But one day I heard God say something—not out loud. It was just an impression deep within.

He said: "Joel, if you worry about this and you keep mulling over all the reasons why it will not work out, then because of your worry, you will allow that to come to pass. But if you will trust Me and use that same energy to believe instead of worry, then I will turn it around and cause it to work out to your advantage."

When I heard that, I found a new perspective. I realized that worry, fear, and wrong thinking are not simply bad habits. They allow the negative to come to pass. I made a decision from that moment on: I would not worry about the bad situation anymore. When I was tempted to get discouraged, I used the temptation as a reminder to thank God that He was in control and to thank Him that He was fighting my battles for me.

Several months later that situation resolved in my favor, and it turned out better than I could have imagined. It was as if God put an exclamation point on it, saying, "See, Joel. If you'll just believe, if you'll just trust Me, I'll not only bring you out, I'll bring you out better off than you were before."

Focus on your faith; let God deal with your fear.

We have so many opportunities to be fearful in these times. People are concerned about the economy, worried about their health, fearful for their children. But God says to you what He said to me: "Don't use your energy to worry. Use your energy to believe."

Do you know that it takes the same amount of energy to believe as it does to worry? It's just as easy to say, "God is supplying all of my needs," as it is to say, "I will never make it."

It takes the same amount of effort to say, "I will live a long healthy life," as it does to say, "I don't think I'll ever get well."

When someone expresses fear about being laid off, I

understand the concern. Your fears may be valid, too, but you can't go around meditating on them, expecting the worst, expecting to have a bad year.

When you dwell on your fears, you use your faith in reverse. Instead of constantly worrying, simply say, "God, my life is in Your hands. I know You're guiding and directing my steps and I'm not expecting defeat. I'm not expecting failure. I'm expecting to have a blessed year. I'm expecting to go over and not under."

You might ask, "Joel, what if I do that and it doesn't happen?"

What if you do it and it does happen? Even if you were to get laid off, you don't have to get discouraged or think, I knew it wouldn't work for me.

Instead, stay in faith. Know that when one door closes, God will open up another. If you keep the right attitude, He'll give you a better job, with better benefits, making better money!

It's time for favor.

Are you using your energy to believe or are you using your energy to worry? Are you expecting God's favor or are you expecting to just barely get by?

Jesus explained in Matthew 9:29 that we will have what our faith expects. Too often, we expect the worst instead of believing for the best. A friend told me about his wife, who always seemed to think bad guys were prowling around their home. At least once a week, she'd wake him up, claiming she heard a burglar downstairs. She'd stay

on him until he'd go down and check it out every time. This went on for years and years. Finally, one night, she did it again: "Get up. Get up. Somebody is downstairs."

A patient man, he followed the routine just as he had a thousand times before. But this time, he was met at the bottom of the stairs by a real burglar, who put a very real gun barrel between his eyes.

"Don't make a sound," the burglar said. "Just give me your valuables."

My friend did as he was told, handing over jewelry and cash. The burglar took the goods and was about to run off when my friend stopped him.

"Hey, wait a minute. You can't leave yet," he said. "You should come upstairs and meet my wife. She's been expecting you for thirty years!"

Great expectations make for great lives.

Don't be like my friend's wife. Expect God's favor. I know people who are being talked into having a bad year. They've listened to the news reports so long they're expecting their finances to go down. They're expecting to barely get by. Yet their attitude should be: I'm expecting to have my best year so far. I'm expecting God to prosper me in the desert. I'm expecting every negative situation to turn around.

Do you know fear is contagious? If you are to stay in faith, you must be careful what you read, what you listen to, and whom you talk to. Worry is contagious. Negativity is catching. If you're around people who are always

complaining, discouraged, and downhearted, their low spirits can bring you down too.

Psychologists did a study in which they gave a group of people a mild electrical shock. Researchers measured their brainwaves from the time they heard they were to be shocked to the time it was over. What's interesting is they had another group in the room just watching. They measured their brainwaves as well. Even though they were not getting the shock, they experienced the same fears as those who did get jolted.

Just seeing fear in others can make us afraid, the researchers reported. A similar study found that we can catch each other's good and bad emotions just like we can catch a cold. This study at Harvard followed nearly five thousand people for more than twenty years. The researchers found that happy people pass on their good moods to others they didn't even know. And those good feelings can last as long as a year.

The same study found that unhappiness can be passed on, too, but that sort of "infection" seems to be weaker than the happy version. The scientists said that a friend's happy face has more positive influence on you than a \$5,000 raise. The message is that even in tough economic times, hanging out with happy friends and family members can keep your spirits high.

So if your friends are constantly complaining, talking about how bad it is and how they will not make it, my advice is to stay clear of their doom and gloom. Find some new friends. Get rid of the bad-news bears. Their worry, their fear, their discouragement are contagious. If you stay around them long enough, there's a good chance you

will catch what they have.

I know you love your friends. You don't have to be rude. Don't go announce to them tomorrow morning: "Joel told me you're contagious, man. I'm staying away from you."

Please, be more tactful than that. And do me a favor. Don't use my name either.

You can be kind. You can be respectful. But gradually pull back and don't spend as much time with them and their dark moods. You shouldn't go to lunch every day with somebody who is always crying the blues and talking about how bad the economy is. You can't do that without it affecting you.

Maybe you can't always escape the doom-and-gloom crowd. Maybe a coworker is like that and you don't have a way to avoid her. Perhaps you married someone with dark moods. If that's the case, God will give you the grace to overcome. Still, when you are around depressing Debbie's and gloomy Guses, make sure you take heavy doses of faith, heavy doses of hope.

Keep a happy heart.

Do you know your moods affect your health? Jeff, a friend of mine, found this out the hard way. His coworkers decided to play a trick on him. He went to work one morning feeling great, just as happy as can be. When he walked in, the receptionist asked, "Are you feeling okay today?"

"Yeah, I feel great," Jeff said. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," the receptionist replied. "You just look a little different. You look a little bit pale."

He didn't think much of her remark. He just went to his office. Ten minutes later another coworker said, "Are you real tired? You don't look up to par."

"No, I feel fine," Jeff insisted.

After a few minutes, though, he thought, Maybe I am a little tired.

Another coworker strolled in. They talked for a moment. Then he said, "Jeff, do you have a fever? You really look warm."

Jeff put his hand his forehead and then loosened his tie. "You know what?" he said. "I am feeling kind of hot."

Finally, one last coworker piled on with "Jeff, you look terrible today! What's wrong with you?"

By 10:00 in the morning Jeff was home under the covers. He was out for a week! That is the power of suggestion. If we don't guard our minds and be careful about what we allow into our brains, we can be talked into all sorts of maladies and mayhem.

Be careful: You can be talked into living a defeated life!

The formula for deep despair goes like this: Get up in the morning and turn on the television news to hear how bad things are in the world.

Next, drive to work listening to the radio with more doomsday news.

Then have lunch with the moaners and groaners in your office.

Follow that formula, and you too can be talked into living a defeated life. Yes, you too can be talked into going through life like there is a piano on your back!

Just like go-home-sick Jeff, the only thing wrong with you may be the company you keep and the sources you tune to. The television news may be mostly bad, but that does not have to be your reality. Sometimes the experts are wrong.

You may hear reports that "the next three years will be dreadful and disastrous." But you don't have to buy into that. You can either loosen your tie, fret, and say, "I'm feeling bad." Or you can say, "You know what? I feel just great. I know God is still on the throne. He is Jehovah Jireh; the Lord my Provider. I am stronger than ever."

I'm asking you: Don't go home sick. Don't let go of your dreams. Don't settle for simply surviving because somebody talked you out of living with joy.

There is always bad news. That's one report, but we have another report. It says you are blessed. You are prosperous. You are talented. You are creative. You are well able to do what God has called you to do.

I like to watch the news. I like to know what's going on. But I'm careful to recognize when I have the information I need and when it's just redundant doom and gloom that I

don't need to hear again and again.

With today's technology, twenty-four-hour cable news, the internet, and satellite radio, some days the same bleak story is told and retold a hundred different ways. Every hour it looks like a new headline, but really it's often the same old bad news repackaged.

If you are not careful, you will wear down and buy into the bleakness, the darkness, the life of just getting by. You will begin to think that it's okay to fail. It's happening to everybody.

"It's just a matter of time before I lose my house."

"I wonder when I will be laid off."

"I wonder when my health will fail."

Turn off negative talk, fill your mind with thoughts of victory!

Just as you can be talked into having a bad year, you can be talked into having a great year. Yes, fear is contagious, but the good news is, faith is even more contagious. Victory is viral! Joy spreads like the flu bug! That's why it's so important to get around other positive people of faith on a regular basis.

I'll give you a dose of good news: You know what's happening today? You're not catching a cold. You're catching a healing. You're not catching defeat. You're catching victory. You're not catching despair. You're catching hope. You're catching a bigger vision. You're catching God's favor.

I must warn you. We are highly contagious.

Whether you realize it or not, you are getting stronger. You're getting more joy. You're getting more peace. Your faith is increasing. When you get around others who are blessed and happy and prosperous and full of faith, they make you better!

I know sometimes you may not feel like attending church. You've had a long week. You're tired, discouraged. Or maybe you don't feel like turning on the television early in the morning to hear a gospel message. But that's when you need to do it more than ever.

You need somebody speaking faith into you. You need to be around other believers who lift your spirits. We draw strength from each other. You may not know the person sitting on your left or on your right, but their faith, their joy, their peace, their victory—they will make you better.

You will leave church feeling stronger than you were before, and it is all because of the company you kept. Good people rub goodness off on you.

When you give in to thoughts of fear, it distorts your perspective. Fear is like a fog. It obscures your vision. It makes things look worse than they really are. But it is mostly an illusion.

Do you know that a dense fog covering seven city blocks and a hundred feet thick can be contained in less than a single, full glass of water?

It looks big. It looks intimidating, but in fact there's

nothing really to it. It's just a hunch of vapors that can fit into a small glass.

Keep that in mind when fear comes creeping into your thoughts like a heavy fog, saying, "You will not make it. That sickness will be the end of you. Your marriage, your family, you will not stay together," just look at that fear and say:

"You look big. You sound impressive. But I know better. There is nothing really to you. You're just like vapors in a glass."

I've seen just how scary fog can be. We were supposed to fly out of Calgary, Canada, a while back. But on that day a heavy fog rolled in. Our plane was delayed an hour or so because of the fog. When we finally took off, I was amazed. We weren't in the air fifteen seconds before we broke through that fog. And you could look down and see it was just a small pocket of fog. It probably didn't cover more than a quarter of a mile area.

Yet when we were driving to the airport and even boarding the plane, we thought the whole city was fogged in. We thought everything was shut down. But in reality it was just a tiny patch of fog.

Fear is much the same. Your fears are almost always greater than the reality. Fear feels big. It is intimidating. It will tell you: "You will never be healthy." "That child will never change." "Your finances will fall apart."

You need to face that fear and say, "You sound impressive. You look tough. But I know the truth. There's nothing really to you. You may talk a good talk, but I know your

bite is not near as big as your bark. You may look permanent, but I know you're only temporary. Things in my life may be a little dark and cloudy right now. It looks like they will never change. But I have inside information. I know the sun is still shining and it's just a matter of time before this fog dissipates and the sky will be as clear and beautiful as it's always been."

Your fears become more powerful when you dwell on them. You give them power by playing out every worst-case scenario as if you were watching a scary movie. Negative thoughts turn into negative images. Even small fears can become terrifying when you blow them out of proportion.

Take that small pain in your side. It's nothing. You just had too much to eat. But negative thoughts will come creeping: That's cancer. My mother had it. My grandmother had it. Now it's my time.

If you let those discouraging thoughts play out over and over again, before long you'll see yourself in the hospital. You'll see yourself not able to take care of your children. You'll see yourself at your own funeral.

No, you should cast down those nagging thoughts. Don't let negative pictures play on the movie screen of your mind. You are the director and the audience. You are in charge. Take the remote control. Change the channel. If you let your imagination run wild, let it run wild in a positive direction.

Play the movie of you accomplishing your dreams. Show the scenes where you overcome all obstacles. See yourself healthy, prosperous, rising higher. You have to do it by

faith.

In the natural, it may look like your family will never stay together. But your attitude should be: I'm changing the channel. I'm not watching that movie. I see my family restored. I see my children excelling. I see us fulfilling our destiny.

You must choose the right channel. Maybe you could reach a new level if you would just be more disciplined in your thought life and not allow negative images to constantly play. It is amazing the tricks your mind can play on you when you allow fear and worry into your heart.

A friend e-mailed me this story, about a twenty-three-year-old woman who supposedly had a wild experience after going to the grocery store. She returned to her car and put the groceries in the backseat. Then, just as she sat down behind the wheel, she heard a loud noise and felt something hit the back of her head. She thought she had been shot.

She reached up and felt what she thought were her brains coming out. She was so shocked, she passed out. Minutes later, she woke up, but still she was afraid to move. She sat there motionless for over an hour, holding the back of her head because she was afraid of losing more brain tissue.

Finally, a gentleman walked by and noticed that something was wrong. He called the police. The patrol officers showed up and asked her to open the car door. She said she couldn't. She said she'd been shot and she was holding her brains in.

The police broke open the window and discovered a pressurized can of Pillsbury biscuits had exploded. That dough had hit the back of her head. She'd felt it and thought it was her brains!

When fear and worry dominate our thoughts, our minds can make the most innocent things seem threatening. So even if the economy is bad, or even if you are going through difficult times with your health or relationships, don't let negative thoughts blind you to reality.

God is saying, "You're fine. It's not what you think. It's just noise. This too shall pass. Turn to a higher channel."

Don't allow negative images to play in your mind.

After I'd been ministering at our church for a year or so, things were going so well—the congregation was growing rapidly—we decided to take a major step of faith and begin a second Sunday morning service. I announced in October that we would begin the new service the following January. Then, for the next few months, I was bombarded with negative thoughts questioning that big decision.

This is a big mistake. Nobody will come to the later service. You will walk out into that huge, empty church and feel like a fool.

I did my best to stay in faith, but those fears kept playing out in my mind. Then, one night I had a dream. A better description would be a nightmare. In this dream it was that first Sunday of the new service. When I walked out to minister, there was not one person in the auditorium—

not Victoria, not my mother, not one choir member, not one usher. Nobody.

I woke up in a cold sweat. The enemy was working overtime on my mind. He said, "Joel, there's still time to cancel the second service. You can still call it off and maybe halfway save face."

It was very difficult to get that image of an empty auditorium out of my mind. I didn't tell anybody about the dream, but I was more than a little worried about it. The week of that first service.

I asked my mother, nonchalantly, if she planned on coming to the new service.

"Joel, does it start this week?" she said.

I thought, Dear God. That nightmare might have been a prophecy.

"Yes, it begins this week, Mother," I said. "And you need to bring your friends, enemies, cousins, relatives, and ancestors."

I had to do what I'm asking you to do. When those negative images came up, I kept changing the channel. I made up my mind. I refused to watch the Empty Auditorium Channel. I declined to tune into the Defeated News Network. I was not flipping to the Fear Factor. I put on a whole different show.

Through my eyes of faith I saw that second Sunday service filled to the upper deck. I kept telling myself, "This fear is just a fog. It's trying to intimidate me, but I know

there is nothing really to it."

I could not wait for the new service on the first Sunday of the year 2000. I arrived an hour earlier than usual. When I pulled in, I could not believe what I saw. One parking lot was already totally full and the others were filling up fast.

There were more than six thousand people at that new service. We've been packing them in ever since!

Cast down those wrong imaginations. Do not let those negative pictures play on the movie screen of your mind. You own the remote control. Change the channel. Don't be talked into having a down year, a down month, or even a down day.

Let me talk you into having a great year. There is no obstacle too big for you, no enemy too strong. Our God is all-powerful. And you may not see better days ahead right now, but don't waste energy worrying. Plug into the highest power source and use that energy to believe in the best.

God has brought you through in the past, and He will bring you through in the future. Surround yourself with people of faith, who speak victory into you. Practice discipline and control over your thoughts. Make a decision each day to choose faith over fear.

CHAPTER 9

Favor Has Been Released In Your Future

Kirk Ring's financial company was downsizing about six hundred people nationwide. His boss told him he'd have to accept a transfer from the historic small town he loved, Smithfield, Virginia, or lose his job. Kirk didn't want to move his family to a larger city.

He'd always dreamed about having his own donut shop. He wasn't a trained baker. He'd only done a little cooking at home. But he liked the idea of having a fun shop that provided an affordable treat to his customers. He went searching for a location and found the right place. He couldn't afford to hire staff, but both his parents and his wife's parents volunteered each day. Things fell into place.

Within a few weeks, he had more customers than he could have imagined, and today he is living his dream.

When God laid out the plan for your life, He lined up the right people, the right circumstances, and the right breaks. In your future, He's already released favor, supernatural opportunities, divine connections. The breaks you need have already been preordained to come across your path.

If you will stay in faith and go out each day and be a person of excellence, you will have experiences that feel as if you just walked into God's blessings.

How did I land that new job? I'm not the most qualified, but I beat out ten other people.

I didn't deserve that break, but they went out of their way to help me.

I missed the street I was looking for and found our dream house with a For Sale sign out front.

Things fell into place. Obstacles disappeared. What happened? You walked into God's blessings. They were already lined up. You just walked into them.

I met a young lady who'd started in the movie business as the backup receptionist in the office of a big film studio. She was part-time, working only when the other lady couldn't come in. But she was very good with people, creative, and showed initiative. She seemed to get one break after another. Somebody left and she moved up. Somebody got promoted; she took their place. Somebody went on maternity leave: another promotion.

One day the owner of that company said to his main manager, "I really like that young lady. I like her attitude. I like her faithfulness. Make sure you take care of her."

Today, six years later, she's a vice president in that company. She oversees dozens of major motion pictures each year. She still marvels at the favor released in her life.

"Joel, I can't believe it," she said. "I don't really know how I got here. Just the other day I was a receptionist and now I'm helping to run the company."

What happened? She walked into God's blessings. My friend, God has great things already arranged for you. He's already released them into your future. You may not be able to see it. You may not be able to figure it out. That's okay. Just stay in faith and keep being your best and you'll be amazed at what you walk into.

It's time for favor.

When I look back at my own life, I wonder: How did I end up here? I wasn't even planning on being a minister. When I'm at home flipping through the channels and I see myself, I think, What in the world are you doing on television? When I go on our worship tour events in different cities around the country and I see the auditoriums full of people, I think, Why did all these people come out? When I see the figures from our web sites and podcasts, I'm just amazed by the hundreds of thousands of people who send us e-mails and watch our services live online, and by the millions of people who download our daily podcasts.

How did this happen? I just walked into it. I just kept being my best, kept being faithful day in and day out, and I walked into my divine destiny. I walked into the favor and the blessings that God had already released. I'm still like a teenage boy when I look at Victoria. She's so beautiful. I look at her and think, How did I ever convince her even to go out with me? Let alone marry me?

I just walked into her mother's jewelry store. I was just stepping into God's favor. I came into His blessings. The same will happen to you if you stay in faith. You will get breaks that you didn't deserve. You will look back and think, How did I end up going from the background to the

forefront? How did I go from being an assistant to being in management?

Or, as a woman I know says, "How did I go from being on welfare to being fair and well?" She stepped into the favor that God already had released.

A friend of mine, Andreas, comes from a large immigrant family that came to this country from a background of poverty. They couldn't seem to break out of their rut in their own country. But my friend was very determined. He loved God and had a heart to help other people. One day somebody told him about a job opportunity in a medical center, cleaning medical equipment. He interviewed, had favor, and was hired. The job was on the graveyard shift so there was a lot of downtime, waiting for medical staff to finish so he could clean up. Andreas made the most of his opportunities, watching and learning. He observed especially how the medical technicians did their jobs.

Then one of the assistant technicians took another job. His boss saw how dedicated Andreas had been, so he offered him the medical tech position, he became an assistant technician. A couple of years later the main technician left and Andreas was put in charge.

Then, after a few more years, Andreas came up with the idea of buying his own equipment and offering his medical tech services to all the area hospitals. The only problem with this idea was that Andreas did not have enough money to get started. So he shared his idea with a banker he'd played basketball with at their gym.

"I tell you what," the banker said. "I'll have my bank lend

you the money."

Time after time, Andreas found himself in the right place at the right time. God had it already arranged. Today Andreas has a very successful company that is among the leaders in the field.

What happened? He just walked into God's blessings. God has already released favor into your future.

It's in front of you. He's already released promotion, increase, good breaks. You don't have to worry. You don't have to try to force things to happen. All you have to do is stay faithful and you too will walk into God's blessings.

In the Bible, Ruth went through serious heartache and pain as a young woman. Her husband was killed in a battle. When her mother-in-law Naomi was moving to a different city, Ruth decided to go with her and help take care of her. There was a great famine in the land. Food was scarce. Ruth went out into the fields every morning to glean wheat left by the reapers. That's how she and Naomi survived.

One day, Boaz, the owner of that field, came to visit. His workers told him about the young widow Ruth who picked up what the harvesters had missed.

"Here's what I want you to do: drop handfuls of wheat on purpose for Ruth," Boaz told his workers.

When you walk into one of your favor moments, people will go out of their way to be good to you. Many times they don't realize why they're doing it. It's simply because you stepped into a time of favor that God released into your

future.

God has dropped handfuls on purpose for you.

In your future, God has already dropped favor. He's dropped promotion. He's dropped health. He's dropped wisdom. He's dropped good breaks. He's dropped divine connections. They're out in front of you just waiting for you to come along. They're called "handfuls on purpose."

I love the fact that Ruth was just minding her own business, being her best, being faithful. All of a sudden she started seeing all this wheat lying in front of her. Think about it. She doesn't have to struggle anymore. She doesn't have to search the field trying to find a little here and a little over there. All she has to do is pick up the wheat piles left for her.

When Ruth goes home with four or five times more wheat than usual, Naomi says, "How in the world did you get all that wheat today?"

I can see Ruth scratching her head. "I don't know," she replies. "I just walked into it. Normally, I get the leftovers. Normally, I get the scraps. But for some reason these workers started leaving all this wheat right in my path."

My friend, you have no idea the great things God has already dropped in your future. You don't know what all God has orchestrated for you. Don't believe those lies telling you nothing good is in store, you'll never accomplish your dreams.

No, if God were to pull back the curtain and allow you to see what He's already lined up—the breaks, the people,

the favor, the things He's already released into your future—you wouldn't worry again. You wouldn't be discouraged. You would be excited about your future. You would live with expectancy knowing that at any moment you could come across one of those handfuls on purpose.

Extraordinary things began to happen to Ruth. She received blessings that she did not have to work for. That's the way our God is. All of a sudden you get breaks that you didn't deserve. You got promoted over somebody that had more seniority. You got thrust from the back to the front. What happened? You came across another handful on purpose.

For a long stretch, we lived in a house that sat on a small lot, about a quarter of an acre. As our children were getting older I really wanted more room so we could go out and run and play ball.

I grew up on an acre lot, and I like being outdoors playing with the kids. One day, just in passing, just kind of dreaming, I said to Victoria, "It sure would be nice to have that lot next door so we could open it up and make it a part of our yard."

It was a corner lot quite a bit bigger than ours. I really didn't think much more about it. The neighbors had been there long before us. We didn't know them well. They were gone a lot. But one day Victoria was backing out of the driveway to take our children to school and the neighbor man came walking over to the car. He handed her a sheet of paper and said, "We're selling our property just in case you know anybody who might like to buy it."

I knew that wasn't a coincidence. That wasn't a lucky

break. That was another handful on purpose. Things fell into place and we were able to purchase the adjoining lot.

"Well, Joel," you might be saying, "I wish I had two lots. I'm in a little apartment." Don't get discouraged. Don't get negative. If God did it for us, He can do it for you. Just keep being faithful. Keep being your best, and you too will walk into your place of blessing. It's already out there. God's placed it in your future. You just have to do your part and walk into it.

After we obtained the neighboring lot, I'd look out upon it and I think to myself: I don't know how we got here. God, You've been so good to us.

I recognize His handfuls on purpose. I didn't deserve it necessarily. I didn't earn it. It was just the favor of God.

Ruth was content with what she had. But God had bigger plans. He didn't want her to spend her life working in the field. God wanted her to own the field. He wanted to do more than just meet her needs. The Scripture goes on to tell how she and Boaz fell in love and married. Boaz was one of the wealthiest men in that area. Ruth no longer worked in the field. She and her husband owned it. God brought Boaz across her path. She just walked into it.

God does not want you to spend your whole life working for someone else. God wants you to own your own company. He doesn't want you to spend your life cleaning an office. God wants you running that office. He doesn't want you to live in a small apartment the rest of your life. God wants you to have a nice home.

He has made you to be the head and not the tail.

God said you will lend and not borrow. It's good to appreciate what God has already done for you, but God is a progressive God. He wants to take you places that you've never dreamed of.

Have a big vision for your life. Don't be complacent and don't be too easily satisfied. I used to go to the Compaq Center in Houston and enjoy watching the Rockets play basketball there. I had season tickets in section 104. But I get much, much more pleasure out of holding services in that same arena. God didn't build that building just for the Rockets to play in. He didn't want me to just visit that arena as a spectator to be entertained. God wanted us to own this building and to worship Him here.

God wants to amaze us with His goodness. I've learned that we don't have to seek blessings. We don't have to seek the right people or seek material things. If you will seek God, if you will put Him first and honor Him with your life, the blessings will seek you.

When you live a life of integrity, when you have a spirit of excellence, giving, serving, and treating people right, God's blessings will chase you down and overtake you. You cannot outrun the good things of God when you do your best to please Him.

The Scripture says in Psalm 37:4: "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." Victoria and I didn't need that extra lot next door. We didn't need more room. That was simply a desire, just a thought: "Hey, this would be nice to have."

But isn't it interesting, God already had it lined up? He had already put the thought in our neighbor's mind. He

sent Victoria out to the driveway at the right time so the neighbor could tell her before he told anyone else. God brought it all together. All I had to do was stay in faith. I walked into that blessing, another handful on purpose.

I didn't demand more of God, and neither did Ruth. She felt blessed just to find leftovers in that field at first. That was her place of blessing for a while, but God wants you to go further. Don't get stagnant. Don't have the attitude, "This is all my parents had. I've gone as far as my grandparents. I guess I've reached my limits." God wants to take you to a new level.

God wants you to be the one to set a new standard. This is what Ruth did. After she married Boaz, the workers she'd once followed into the field became Ruth's employees. Once, they'd told her what to do, but suddenly, she gave them their instructions. She got thrust from the back to the front. God can do the same thing for every one of you. All it takes is one touch of God's favor. One Boaz in your life and you'll go from working in the field to owning the field. You'll go from being the receptionist to being a vice president. You'll go from cleaning the equipment to owning the equipment. Somebody asks you, "How'd that happen? How'd you get here?" "I don't know. I just walked into it. It's just God's favor, another handful on purpose."

I encourage you to expand your vision for your life. Stay in faith. Live with expectancy. Know that any moment you could come across another handful of favor: You meet someone who presents an opportunity. You inherit land from a long-lost relative. God gives you an idea that leads to a promotion.

There are handfuls on purpose God has lined up for every

one of us. If you'll stay faithful, like Ruth, the next handful on purpose could be the relationship you've been dreaming about. God's already picked out your loved one. Just like Boaz was there for Ruth, God has strategically placed a person in your future. If you'll just keep being faithful, you will come across that person's path. It won't be an accident; it won't be a coincidence. It will be a divine-connection. God put that person in your life on purpose.

You will receive favor from your forefathers.

If you had parents, grandparents, and others in your family history who honored God, you are entitled to ancestral blessings. That means you will come into favor, you will come into good breaks that you're not directly responsible for. You will have opportunities that you don't necessarily deserve. It's because your parents, your grandparents, somebody in your family honored God.

The Scripture talks about how you'll live in houses that you didn't build. You'll reap from vineyards that you didn't plant. I know many of you, like me, had relatives before you who prayed and believed. They sowed so many good seeds. But the fact is they didn't see the increase and the favor that you're seeing today. What happened? They paid the price. They stayed faithful, and now the Lord God of your fathers is increasing you. The Lord God of your fathers is showing you that unusual, extraordinary favor.

You should always be grateful for the parents or grandparents who brought you to church. You may not have wanted to go back then, but they made your life a lot easier. They sowed seeds so God could bring you more of

those handfuls on purpose.

Right now I'm reaping many of the seeds my parents sowed. My father wrote many books, but he didn't have any of them published by a major publisher. He didn't see the increase and the favor I'm seeing today. I'm sure my father would be stunned at how we've expanded the ministry around the world on television, with the internet, and our podcasts. And that's the way it works. When you honor God with your life, it not only affects you but will benefit your children, your grandchildren, and even future generations.

"Well," you say, "Joel, that's great. But when I look back in my family line, I don't see anyone—parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles—nobody honored God. I don't have this godly heritage you're talking about."

In that case, you should be the one to start it. And keep in mind, God still has great things in store. Do you know Ruth came from a long line of idol worshippers? Generation after generation before her—no one cared anything about the things of God. But because Ruth had a pure heart, because she had a desire to do what's right, God did incredible things in her life. God can do the same thing for each one of you.

Get this down in your spirit: God wants you to reach new levels of fulfillment, new levels of increase, new levels of promotion, new levels of victory.

You have been faithful. You've served others. You've been your best day in and day out. You're about to see a major shift. You're about to come across a handful on purpose that will propel you to a new level. You will step into a

new dimension—the overflow anointing.

If you are discouraged right now, know that if God had not already released good things into your future, you wouldn't be here. He would have taken you on home. As long as you're breathing, there's another handful on purpose in front of you. Somewhere in your path there's promotion, increase, good breaks, divine connections.

When you really understand this principle, it puts a spring in your step. You'll go out each day excited, thinking, I wonder when that next handful is coming. It could be today. It could be tomorrow. It could be next week.

When you stay in faith, you will walk into God's blessings. Understand that He's already released into your future everything you need to fulfill your destiny. My prayer for you is that you will receive everything God has in store. I speak it over you right now: new seasons of increase. I declare favor over your life. I speak strength into you. I speak health. I speak wisdom. I speak creativity. I speak divine connections. I speak supernatural opportunities. They are coming your way. I declare it in the name of Jesus.

CHAPTER 10

Speaking Faith-Filled Words

I have a friend we'll call Ned, who played on my sports teams in our younger days. As much as I liked Ned, he just saw the worst in every situation. Even when he was being funny, his humor was dark. Whenever I hadn't seen Ned for a while, I'd innocently ask him what he'd been up to. He would always—always—reply: "Not much. I'm just getting old and fat and bald."

I've probably heard Ned say that five hundred times. Keep in mind that when we were teenagers, he was really in great shape. He was the star of the high school football team. He had thick curly hair. Ned was anything but old, fat, and bald.

So back then, I knew he was just kidding. I kid around a lot too. but I never kid about getting old, fat, or bald—and especially not bald! I want to keep my hair as long as I can.

Well, time flew by and I hadn't seen Ned in fifteen or twenty years, but then I ran into him one day. Rather, I ran into some guy I didn't recognize until Ned spoke up.

I nearly passed out. Ned had prophesied his future. He looked old, fat, and bald!

I don't know about you, but I will not speak defeat over my life like Ned did. My declaration is, "I'm growing younger. God is renewing my youth. I am stronger with each breath. Health and healing flow through me.

"And I will keep my hair—forever!"

One of our staff members once confessed that before she leaves the house every morning, she looks in the mirror and says, "Girl, you are looking good today."

I saw her awhile back and asked if she was still doing it. She said, "Yes! In fact, this morning when I looked in that mirror, I said, 'Girl, some days you look good, but today you're looking really good!'"

I wonder how people are bold enough to look in the mirror and compliment themselves. But shouldn't we be as nice to ourselves as we are to other people? Shouldn't we be our own best friends and cheerleaders? Yet most of the time, we put ourselves down worse than we would an enemy: "I don't look good today. I'm overweight. I'm unattractive. I can't do anything right."

Don't speak defeat over your life.

Your words prophesy what you become. Be bold. Dare to say, "I look great today. I'm made in the image of Almighty God. I am strong and talented. I'm blessed. I am creative. I will have a productive day."

Our words truly do have creative power. If you want to know what you will be like five years from now, just listen to what you say today. Too often, we give voice to our doubts and fears, giving them power in the process:

I'll never be well.

I'll never be debt-free.

I know I'm catching the flu.

This marriage will never last.

Those who talk like victims often wonder why they can't catch a break, why they are stuck and can't get rolling again. It's because they are calling in defeat. They are calling in mediocrity.

Our words can bless our future or they can curse it.

Sometimes you will feel down. You may wake up feeling under the weather. You may be burdened by problems. But don't dwell on the negative. Send your words out in the direction you want your life to go!

Don't use your words to dwell on a bad situation. Use them to change that situation. You may feel down and out. So swing for the fences. Let your words lift you up. Dare to make a declaration of faith that propels you forward:

"You know what? This will be a great day. I have God's favor. He's directing my steps. Whatever I touch will prosper and succeed."

When you voice your faith, you bless your future.

You call in favor, call in increase, call in good breaks. Let me ask you: What have you been calling in? What are you speaking over your family, over your children, over your health, over your finances?

It's not enough to just think of faith and hope. It's not enough to just believe it. We give life to our faith when we

Speak out about our dreams.

When your words wallow in misery and defeat, you can't expect to rise above that level, can you? If you announce that your child will never amount to much, you are inviting him to live down to your expectations. You are calling in more of the same.

Change your words. Change your life. Forget victimhood and despair. Express gratitude and hope:

"Father, I thank you that my child is blessed. He will make good decisions. He is free from every stronghold. He will fulfill his destiny."

Your child may be as rebellious as can be. But when you're with your friends, don't talk about how bad he is and how he will never change. Speak victory over his life.

When friends ask how your son is doing, simply say: "You know what? He's blessed. He makes good decisions. He's kind and respectful. He just doesn't know it yet!"

Words are like seeds. Plant them carefully to nourish your faith, to raise your life higher and higher.

When God hears expressions of hope and optimism, He says to the angels, "Do you hear what she's saying? She's speaking faith. Angels, I have an assignment for you. Go down there and begin to turn the situation around."

The Scripture says that we have to call the things that are not as if they already are. You may not feel well, but you should not dwell on bad feelings with your words: "My

back has been hurting me for years. I'm getting so old. I don't think I will ever be better."

Those words speak defeat into your future. Turn them around. Report a victory:

"I may not feel up to par, but I know it's only temporary. God is restoring health unto me. I'm getting stronger, healthier, younger. My best days are still up ahead."

With those words of victory, you will receive what you call in.

We've all known people who complain constantly of being tired and run-down. "I'm so tired. I don't have any energy."

Think about those people. They always look tired and run-down, don't they? They have said it so much that it's become their reality.

The more we talk about a negative, the more negative we become. If you wake up in the morning feeling lethargic, instead of complaining, you should declare: "I'm strong. I'm full of energy. God is renewing my strength. I can do what I need to do today!"

Sometimes when Victoria and I have been traveling and busy with work and family, she will say, "Joel, I am so tired. Look at my eyes. Can you see how red they are?"

I always say, "No, Victoria. You look great. You look just as beautiful as ever."

Victoria doesn't give up that easily.

"No, I don't," she'll say. "I know you. You just won't say it."

She's right, of course. I won't agree with that. I don't want to speak defeat. I want to speak victory!

I often wonder what she would think if I ever said, "Oh yeah, Victoria. You don't look good at all. You look so tired. Are you really wearing that?"

I'd have to find another ride home, for sure!

We all get tired and feel run-down sometimes. Still, the more we talk about being tired, the more tired we become. The more we talk about being depressed, the more depressed we'll be. The more you talk about being overweight, the more out of shape you will become.

Switch over to the language of victory.

Don't talk about the way you are when you are down and out. Talk about the way you want to be, up and over! This applies to all forms of expression. A recent study found that women cancer patients who used more positive words in writing about their experiences had bigger improvements in their emotional quality of life than those who used more negative words.

Our daughter Alexandra was about four years old when she overheard Victoria and me talking about a friend's little boy who was having terrible headaches. It was causing him to miss school and affecting his quality of life.

We had talked to our kids about the power of words as prophecy. Little Alexandra spoke up and said, "Daddy, I don't have headaches and I never will have headaches."

I thought, Honey, you are prophesying the right thing.

If we ever got off track back then with our words, little Alexandra would straighten us out. I was working on the garage door one day because it had come off track. I was trying to get it to go up, but it was stuck. I was frustrated. I didn't even know Alexandra was there. But I said under my breath, "This thing will never work."

Then I heard this little voice speak up, "Daddy, you're going to have what you say."

I thought, Man, it is terrible when your own children have to remind you to practice what you preach.

The Scripture says: "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." If you are moving up to the next level, you need to say so. If you plan to overcome an addiction, you should say so. If you are aiming for a blessed year, if you are wiping out your debts, if you are determined to accomplish your dreams, then say so! Nothing happens until you speak it out.

Notice Scripture does not say: "Let the redeemed of the Lord think so," or "Let the redeemed believe so." Of course, it's important to think right. It's important to believe right. But something supernatural happens when we speak it out.

You don't have to say it to anybody else. Just say it to yourself. Driving to work, or in the shower:

"The economy may be low, but I am blessed. I am prosperous. I will lend and not borrow."

"The hurricane may have hit. I had some setbacks. But I know it was a setup for a comeback. This will be my best year so far. The favor of God is turning it around."

Or *"I may be a little lonely right now, but I know this is just a season. God is bringing somebody great into my life. My perfect someone is on the way. And someday we will be perfectly happy!"* Why not shoot for perfection, right?

There is a correlation between what we say and what God does. You cannot be passive and say, "Alright, Joel. I will not speak anything negative. I'll make sure I don't say the wrong kind of words."

That's good but not good enough. If you hope to see God's best, stay on the offensive. Speak victory over your life. If you're not putting your vision out there with your faith-filled words, you are limiting what God can do.

Every day before you leave the house, you should say:

"Father, I want to thank you that I have your favor on my life today. Father, thank you that You are directing my steps, causing me to be at the right place at the right time. Thank you that Your favor is bringing opportunity, bringing increase and promotion, blessing me so I can be a blessing to somebody else."

It's time for favor.

Psalm 91:2 says: "I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge, my fortress.'" The scripture goes on to say: He will "cover you," "deliver you," "protect you."

Notice the connection. "I will say" and "He will do." This tells me if we're not saying of the Lord, He will not do what we ask of Him. Find the promises in the Scriptures and say of the Lord. Take that promise and say, "God, You said You wanted me to be healthy. You said You wanted me to be prosperous. So I say of the Lord, 'You are my Healer. You are my Provider. You are my Way Maker. You are my Vindicator. You are my Victory.'"

When you say of the Lord, He shall do. On the other hand, if we're not saying anything, we're not releasing our faith. You could read the passage in the reverse. "I will not say of the Lord, and He will not do."

Maybe you are not speaking enough victory over your life. If you're not getting where you want to go, maybe you are not doing what you need to get there. Why isn't your situation turning around? Are you declaring favor every day? Do you get up every morning and say, "I am blessed. I walk in divine health. The favor of God is opening up new doors. I will fulfill my destiny" ?

Get in agreement with God.

You may not be blessed right now. You may be hurting financially, your health may be poor, but you can speak in faith without denying the truth. God said, "Let the weak say, 'I am strong.'" He didn't say, "Let the weak talk about their weakness."

We're not supposed to talk about the way we are. We're supposed to talk about the way we want to be. Get in agreement with God. If God says I am more than a conqueror, I may not feel like it. It may not look like it. But if God says it, I will agree with Him. I will say it, too.

"I am more than a conqueror."

You may be struggling in your finances. God says you will lend and not borrow. He says that you will run over with His favor. Your report needs to reflect your faith: "I am blessed. God is supplying all of my needs. I have more than enough."

The Scripture says we will eat the fruit of our words. You may not be where you want to be today. But could it be because of the words you've spoken in the past?

If you've claimed: "I'll never rise any higher. I've gone as far as I can go." Those words may claim you. Sure enough, you will be stuck at the same place year after year.

Or maybe you've said, "I'll never break this addiction. I've had it too long. It's too hard." And just like you've said them, those words will control you.

So change what you say. Adopt this attitude: "This may be the way it's been in the past, but this is not the way it's staying. I'm coming up higher. I may feel weak, but my declaration is, I am strong. I may have had this addiction for years, but I'm declaring I am free."

When you say of the Lord you are healthy, you are whole, you are free, you are blessed, you are prosperous—when you say it, God has promised He will do it.

Now, maybe you contend that you've been saying it for a long time without getting the desired results. But the Scripture says: "Let us hold last the profession of our faith, for He is faithful that promised."

If you keep saying the right thing, if you keep speaking victory, speaking favor, speaking health and wholeness, God is faithful and those seeds that you are sowing will reap.

In due season you will eat the fruit of your words.

Do you remember when Jesus was hungry, walking through a town, so he stopped at a fig tree for fruit. But there were no figs on it because it was not the season.

So Jesus spoke to the tree.

"May no one ever eat fruit from you again," he said. His disciples heard what Jesus said and found it strange. They walked over and examined the tree. It looked no different. Jesus said the tree would wither and die.

The disciples must have thought, He's lost His touch. It didn't work this time. It looks just the same as before He said anything.

But they didn't realize that the moment Jesus cursed the tree, something happened in the unseen realm. The tree's life was cut off at the roots. It was just a matter of time before what happened on the inside showed up on the outside.

Sure enough, they came back a little later and saw Jesus was exactly right. The tree was withered and dead.

The same principle holds for us. When you speak God's word, the moment His promises come out of your mouth, something happens in the unseen realm. You may not see it for a week, or for a year, or even ten years, but that doesn't mean it will not happen.

Too often, we cancel out our promises by speaking negative words. We start off right, but when we don't see anything happening over time, we get discouraged. We cannot speak defeat and expect victory. You can't talk of sickness and expect health. You can't talk lack and poverty and expect an abundant life. That's why it says, "Hold fast the profession of your faith."

Put a watch over your mouth.

And decide that no matter how long it's taking to achieve your goals, no matter how bad life looks in the moment, you will not speak of doubt and disbelief. Declare favor over your finances. Speak victory over sickness, freedom over addiction.

You may need to shift into a higher gear if you are not speaking enough faith over your life. If you have big dreams, you'll need to declare favor in a big, big way. Once a week won't cut it. "Oh, God, I hope You'll bless me this week."

No, declare favor every day, all day. Let it flow out of your mouth and under your breath. You should be saying, *"Father, I want to thank you that Your favor is surrounding me like a shield. Thank you that Your favor is opening up doors no man can shut. Your favor is bringing supernatural opportunities, divine connections, causing me to be at the right place at the right time."*

Zechariah 10:1 says: "Ask the Lord for rain in the springtime." Rain in the Scripture represents God's favor. What does "Ask for rain in the springtime" mean?

If it's springtime, the rainy season, it doesn't seem like you'd need to ask for rain. But God is saying, "My favor may be available, but you will not receive it unless you ask."

Right now God is showering down blessings, healing, promotion, good ideas. It's raining favor. If you are not sharing in His favor, you might want to watch your words. Here's the key: If you don't unleash your words in the right direction, if you don't call in favor, you will not experience those blessings. Nothing happens unless we speak. Release your faith with your words.

This is a great day to be alive. God is pouring out his favor like no other time in history. Right now it is raining increase. It's raining new ideas. It's raining promotion. My encouragement to you is, do not let it pass you by.

Instead of saying, "Oh, everybody gets blessed except me. I don't know why they get good breaks and I never do," I suggest you declare it for yourself: *"I am blessed. I am prosperous. I am favored. I am healthy. I am free."*

Ask for rain in this time of rain.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. I heard somebody say, "The devil doesn't have to defeat us. We defeat ourselves."

Don't let that be you. When you speak faith, you're in

agreement with God. When you speak defeat, you're in agreement with the enemy.

God-talk brings God on the scene. Enemy-talk brings the enemy on the scene. All through the day there are two voices competing for our attention—the voice of faith and the voice of defeat.

You may hear a voice saying, "You'll never rise any higher. You don't have what it takes. You've reached your limits."

Yet if you listen carefully, you'll hear another voice saying, "You are well able. You can do all things through Christ. Your best days are still up ahead."

Now you must choose which voice comes to life. Make your choice known by speaking out. The moment you verbalize that thought, you give it the right to come to pass. When you choose negative words, you choose the wrong voice.

"Nothing good ever happens to me. I'm not that talented. I'll probably never get out of this problem."

Get in agreement with God. That other voice may be louder, but you can override it. You can take away all of its power by simply choosing the voice of faith.

Would you get up in the morning and tell your spouse "I will not go to this interview. They wouldn't like me anyway. I am not qualified. They won't choose me."

No, with your own words you'd be sealing your fate. You must ask yourself, "Whose report will I believe, the report of victory or the report of defeat?"

A battle takes place in your mind when challenges arise. All through the day you will be tempted to talk about how bad life is; you're stuck with debt, your medical report was bad, your kids are in trouble. But you must put a halt to that talk: "No, I am not giving life to that defeat. I am not speaking sickness. I'm not speaking lack. I'm not speaking fear. I'm choosing a different report. I believe the report of the Lord, and it says I am blessed. I am favored. I am prosperous. I am healthy. I am whole. I'm a victor, never a victim."

Don't talk about your problems; talk to your problems.

Speak to those mountains in your path. Declare favor over difficult situations. Too often we talk to God about how big our problems are. We should be talking to our problems about how big our God is!

In the Scripture, Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David and the governor of Judah, faced a major challenge. He was ordered to rebuild a temple on Mount Moriah where the legendary Solomon's Temple had been destroyed seventy years earlier. The task seemed impossible because of opposition from local residents.

But Zerubbabel is not discouraged. Instead, he chooses to face the task before him, saying, in effect, "Who are you, oh great mountain that stands against me? You shall become a plane, a mere molehill, and I will finish the temple by shouting, 'Grace! Grace!' to it."

Notice this is saying that a mountain will be turned into a molehill. How? By speaking grace to it. Another word for

"grace" is "favor." In other words, Zerubbabel said to the mountains, "I've got the favor of God. I can do all things through Christ. I will fulfill my destiny."

I love the way it begins: "Who are you, oh great mountain?" He was saying, "You can't defeat me. Don't you know me? I have an advantage. I have the favor of God." When he looked at his mountain he didn't get discouraged. He knew it wasn't permanent. He understood this principle. He could speak favor to his mountains, and God promised they would become mere molehills.

In the same way, when you face challenges, don't speak of defeat. Don't complain. Dare to be like Zerubbabel, who spoke to the mountains and declared favor.

If you are struggling in your finances, get out your checkbook and speak favor over it. If you have a child in trouble, speak favor over that child. Perhaps a situation at work is difficult. Speak to that mountain. Declare God's favor. He has promised your mountains will turn into molehills.

When Moses was leading the people of Israel through the wilderness and they needed water, God told him to strike the rock. And when Moses struck the rock, water flowed from it. Sometime later, the people with Moses needed water again. This time God told him to speak to the rock. But do you know what Moses did instead? He went back to doing it the old way. He struck the rock again and again. Eventually, water did come out, but it took a lot more effort than was needed.

Often we find ourselves doing the same thing when

confronted with challenges. We go back to our old ways. We try to solve our problems by relying on what has worked in the past.

Whether it's correcting a child's behavior or dealing with a tough situation at work, we get stressed and frustrated when the old ways don't work. But God says you don't have to strike the rock anymore. "My Son came so you could live an abundant life. Just speak to the rock. Just declare favor over that situation."

God wants you to enter into an anointing of ease.

You do not have to live a life of frustration. Get up every day and say, "I am blessed. No weapon formed against me will prosper. What is meant for my harm, God is using to my advantage. This problem will not defeat me."

If you'll direct your words in the right direction, you will clear out obstacles that have held you back for years. You will see family difficulties that seemed permanent turn around. That situation at work you've struggled with, God will smooth it out, giving you wisdom, favor, removing the wrong people, bringing in the right people, making your crooked places straight.

You may have been striking the rock, but it's time to speak to the rock. Don't talk about your problem. Talk to your problem. Every morning when you wake up, declare God's favor. Learn to call things that are not as if they already are.

Get in agreement with God. Say what He says about you. Speaking His words is one of the most powerful things you can do. Remember, it's not enough to think it. It's not

enough to believe it. Give life to your faith. Speak it out.

Once you make a habit of declaring favor and speaking faith-filled words, you will see negative situations turn around. Your mountains will turn into molehills. God will fight your battles for you. You will overcome obstacles, defeat every enemy; and every dream and every promise God put in your heart will come to pass because it's time for favor!

PART THREE

IT'S TIME FOR RESTORATION

CHAPTER 11

God Can Turn Back Time

We all have missed opportunities or blown chances at some time in our lives. We can look back and think, *Why didn't I put more effort into that relationship? Why didn't I take that job? Or, Why did I spend all those years running with the wrong crowd, partying, when I should have been getting ahead?*

Some people missed out on opportunities because they were raised in an unhealthy environment or grew up in poverty. Whatever the reason, when things don't go our way, it's tempting to think, Too bad for me. I'll never have that chance again. I've missed my season.

But the good news is that God always has another season. He said in the book of Joel 2:25 that He will restore the years that have been stolen.

You may not be able to relive your childhood, but God can make the rest of your life so rewarding and so fulfilling that it makes up for lost opportunities in your past. You may feel like you're wasted years in a relationship that didn't work out, years on a job that turned out to be a dead end. Don't be discouraged.

God controls time. For every opportunity you've missed, every chance you've blown, God can turn back the clock and bring bigger and better things across your path.

When I met Linda at a book signing, she told me she'd been suffering from regret over her daughter. Linda

admitted that she had not been the best mother in the world. She and her daughter Paula had not spoken in years. She had reached out to her several times, but the daughter would not have anything to do with her.

"We lost so much time that we could have had together," she said sadly.

This mom was deeply discouraged. Linda felt she'd flunked motherhood. To my surprise that day, Linda introduced Paula standing in line behind her.

Both women had tears streaming down their faces. I didn't know what was going on, but I was getting a little teary myself.

"We had not spoken in thirteen years," Linda explained. "So neither of us knew that we were both fans of your ministry and your books."

This divided mother and child had come separately to the book signing. They ran into each other while waiting in line and reunited that very day. When they saw each other, it was as though God had torn down the wall keeping them apart.

All the hurt, all the pain, all the resentment melted away in a split second. That night was a turning point. Their relationship was restored, and today Linda and Paula are making up for lost time!

Maybe you're dealing with a strained relationship. Maybe you've experienced conflicts and hurts. You may have built up a wall of hard feelings. You may feel someone once close to you has become a negative influence in your

life.

Do not make the mistake of settling into a bitter situation. Relationships can be healed. No disagreement has to last forever. Keep believing. Keep praying.

If you will stay in faith, God will restore your relationship. And he will make up for those lost years. God wants to turn back time.

Don't settle for less than God's best.

In an earlier chapter, I mentioned the story of Hezekiah and the fifteen extra years God granted him. Naturally, Hezekiah was very excited when he got the news about his new lease on life. It was almost too good to be true. Just for peace of mind, he asked God for a sign.

Since they were dealing with time, God said, "Alright, I Hezekiah. Go out and watch the sundial."

They didn't have clocks or wristwatches like we have today. They had markings on the ground to help them tell time according to the positions of the sun's shadows.

Hezekiah then made a bold request that God turn back time.

Basically, Hezekiah was saying, "God, if this promise is to come to pass, if You add years to my life, don't just stop time," he said. "I know You can do that. I want You to do something more difficult—something even more out of the ordinary. God, I'm asking You to make the shadow go in the wrong direction. I'm asking You to turn back time."

That took a lot of nerve. Hezekiah was putting God's love to the test by asking Him to do something that, as far as we know, God had never done before. He asked God to interrupt the entire solar system just to assure Hezekiah that His promise was sincere.

Sure enough, over the next forty minutes, Hezekiah watched the shadow go counterclockwise. The Scripture says that the sun went in reverse ten degrees.

God was sending us a message too. I believe He was saying, "I can reset the clock in your life. I can restore the years you've lost."

If you stay in faith, a shift will occur.

You may think you've blown it. You may feel you've wasted too much time. Yet I'm convinced God has new opportunities in front of you. He wants the rest of your life to be better than the first part.

God will restore the seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years you've lost. He will present you with opportunities you missed because you were in the wrong place. Even if it was your fault, God is so good; He's so full of mercy.

God will give you another chance.

Why don't you get a vision for it? You may think that it's been too long and you've been through too much. You may have convinced yourself that you will never be able to get those lost years back. But the same God who stepped out of eternity and turned the clock back for Hezekiah says to you, "I can make up for lost time. I can

restore those years."

I was surprised when a church member I'd known for a while, Riley, told me that for forty years of his life, he'd been a cocaine addict. He came from a good family. At one time, he was a bright young man with many opportunities, but he went astray.

"Joel, I don't even remember the first part of my life," he said. "I was so high and so messed up. I ruined my marriage. I blew my education."

At his lowest points, he thought his life was over. Yet today he is a man in his fifties with a good job and a reunited, loving family. He volunteers for us every weekend.

"I never dreamed God would give me another chance," he told me. "I never dreamed I could be this fulfilled."

What happened? God turned back time for my friend Riley. God restored those lost years. His latter days will be better than his former days. That's the way of our God.

Be bold like Hezekiah and say, "God, I'm asking You to give me back every opportunity I missed. My problems may have been my fault. I may have blown my opportunities, but, God, I know You are so full of mercy. I believe You love me so much You can turn back time and give me another chance."

When you have that kind of attitude, you get God's attention. You may have given up on your dreams. You may be dragging around thinking about the years you lost in a marriage, how you were mistreated on the job, how you made poor decisions here and there.

I encourage you to reject that defeated mind-set. Don't dwell on the past. Have you ever tried to drive a car forward while looking only in the rearview mirror? You can't do that and make good progress. The same is true in life. You can't move ahead to the good if you are always looking back at the bad. Have hope. Look ahead. If you have faith, God will make up for lost time.

God says, "I control the whole universe, and if I stopped the solar system for Hezekiah, I can reset the clock in your life."

Maybe you do not understand how your life could be restored. "Joel, I don't see how it could happen. I've been through too much."

Rest assured, you don't have to know how. Just know Him. All we have to do is believe. Be open to His blessings. God can give you one idea to make up for everything that you've lost.

Imagine how Harland felt moving from job to job, place to place for many years. His father died when he was just five years old. He dropped out of grade school and ran away from home, then bounced around, taking whatever work he could find. To make a little extra money during the Depression, he opened a tiny restaurant, serving meals in his gas station in a small Kentucky town.

The little restaurant became so popular that he had to expand to a building across the street. Fire destroyed that place a few years later, but Harland didn't give up. He rebuilt it. His Kentucky fried chicken made from a secret recipe of eleven herbs and spices became so popular, the

governor of the state made Harland Sanders an honorary Kentucky colonel.

But still there was no coasting, even for the Colonel. He was in his sixties, nearing retirement age when a new highway bypass took traffic out of his little town. His business went down to nothing. He was forced to shut down the restaurant.

Most men his age might have given up and retired. But not Colonel Sanders. He knew God is a God of restoration. He knew God still had a way to bring his dreams to pass.

After he sold his business and paid his debts, Colonel Sanders only had \$105. He hit the road, going from town to town with his chicken fryer in the back of his truck, selling his chicken to other restaurants.

Word got around quickly that Colonel Sanders's chicken was finger-lickin' good! By the time he was seventy years old, Colonel Sanders had Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants all over the United States and Canada. Today there are more than eleven thousand KFCs all around the world. No doubt you have had a piece of Colonel Sanders's chicken. The next time you have one of his wings, think of God's restorative powers.

For a long time, life seemed to treat Harland Sanders harshly. He could easily have felt he got the short end of the stick during those hard times. But God knows how to turn back time.

It's time for restoration.

I've experienced God's restorative powers myself. Our

daughter Alexandra was born a month and a half before my father went to be with the Lord. During that time my dad was on dialysis for his failing kidneys, and often I would take him up to the clinic and bring him home. It was a very busy season in my life.

Then when Dad died, I was thrust into serving as pastor. I was doing my best just to stay above water. Looking back, I can hardly remember the first couple of years of Alexandra's life. It was such a time of transition. I was swept up in learning how to minister, trying to figure everything out.

The new role just consumed me. One day not long ago, I was struck by the fact that I don't have as many memories of Alexandra's early childhood as I do of her brother, Jonathan's. It bothered me, so I prayed on it, almost in passing. I said, "God, I'm asking You to make up for that lost time where I was so busy and so preoccupied with other things."

Today I feel Alexandra and I are as close as we can be. She likes to do everything with her dad. She would rather do cartwheels in the backyard for me than visit with her friends. It warms my heart. We're so close that I even tease her that sometimes I need a break from her.

"Alexandra, don't you want to go to your cousins' house?" I'll say, kidding. "You all can go swimming or something. Why don't you have some friends over?"

"No, Daddy," she'll play along, "I just want to stay here with you."

I believe we have bonded so closely thanks to God's

turning the clock back and making up for those lost years. You may feel as though you weren't as good a parent as you should have been. You were busy doing your own thing, dealing with your own issues. Maybe now your relationships with your family are not what they should be. You're tempted to feel guilty and think, *If I had just spent more time with them, if I'd of just made them a higher priority.*

Instead of giving in to guilt, do something far more constructive. Ask God, as I did, for another chance. "God, restore this relationship. Let me put into it the time, effort, and feeling required to heal it. Anything I missed, I'm asking You to allow me to make up for lost time."

If you'll be bold enough to ask, then God can restore the time you've lost.

Gregory, a businessman, went through a legal battle for three and a half years. It was hell on earth. Some business competitors stirred up trouble. They made untrue allegations, and he had to defend himself. At first he was strong and determined. Gregory did his best to fight the good fight. But as the charges and countercharges dragged on month after month, he eventually lost his joy for the business. He was run-down, just tired of fighting.

As it dragged on, Gregory made a sad statement one day.

"Joel, I don't really care anymore," he said. "This thing has about ruined me. It's about ruined my business. I don't think it will ever change."

It's very unhealthy to have an "I don't care" attitude. That's when people make major mistakes and do things

they regret later on. I told Gregory that God wants to restore those years he's lost fighting the competition in court. He may not see how it can happen, but God is a supernatural God.

If you'll stay in faith, God will not only bring you out, He'll also turn back time. God will make up for the lost joy. He'll make up for the lost peace. He'll restore your victories.

That's exactly what happened to Gregory. Several years after he told me that he'd lost his joy in the business, his legal problems came to a successful end. God vindicated him. Today he's stronger, happier, more blessed than he's ever been.

Maybe, like Gregory, you are in a difficult situation. It's been dragging on and dragging your spirits down in the process. Maybe your struggle has stolen your joy, stolen your peace. Let me encourage you. You've got to stand strong and stay positive. Declare your determination by faith "This thing will not defeat me. I may have lost years, but I know God will restore these years. He will bring me out. He will leave me better off than I was before.

At one point, King David had an I don't care attitude. Out of frustration, he was about to make a foolish decision and attack Nabal and his family. David was on edge. It was taking so long for him to see God's promise come to pass. He knew he was destined to take the throne, but years had gone by and it hadn't happened.

Nabal's wife Abigail stepped up and reminded David of his destiny. She convinced him not to attack her family.

"David, why would you even bother with my husband?" she said. "You are the next king of Israel. That would be like swatting a fly."

She spoke sense into David, reminding him of God's promise over his life. I believe God sends us an Abigail any time we are about to delay our divine destiny. When you are tempted to be frustrated, you must keep God's promises in the forefront of your mind. Down deep you have dreams and desires; you know one day you will accomplish your goals. One day you will be well. One day you will be out of debt. One day you will be vindicated.

Maybe right now things don't look so good. Like David, maybe you are in one of those wilderness periods. You don't see anything positive happening. It is very tempting to think, What's the use? It will never change. I've been believing for five, ten, fifteen years.

Let me serve as the voice of Abigail: Stay the course. Keep believing. You may be tired, discouraged, and frustrated, but don't give up on your future. It may be taking a long time, but stay focused. Stay on the high road and keep being your best.

I wasn't there when God spoke the promise to you. But I believe what God has said about you. You can overcome every obstacle. You can break every addiction. You can live an abundant life. I believe new seasons of favor and increase are coming your way. I know God can restore the years. He can turn back time. Don't give up on your future.

You may have been through heartache and pain. You have had disappointments and unfairness in your life, but the

depth of your past foretells the height of your future. When a skyscraper is to be constructed high into the sky, the builders must first dig low to give it a solid foundation. Only then can the structure rise to its full height. Your foundation is being formed. It may be taking a long time, but if you'll stay in faith, God is preparing you. Don't let your guard down; don't compromise your future. You have too much to lose.

God is saying to you: *"If you will persevere even though it's difficult and believe even though you don't see anything happening, then I will step in and do what you can't do. I will make up for lost time. I will propel you to new levels. I will bring supernatural opportunities. I will open new doors. I will put the right people in your path. I will heal the sick. I will release you from debt and lack. The chains of addictions and wrong thinking will be broken off of you."*

God says: "The promises I put in you, I will bring them to pass."

Why don't you get a vision for that today? God will make up for your lost time. Every opportunity you've missed, every chance you've blown, all those years you may have wasted, I declare over you: restoration is coming your way.

God will restore those years. Things are changing in your favor. Your latter days will be better than your former days. I declare the rest of your life will be better than the first part of your life. So receive it by faith!

CHAPTER 12

You Have Comeback Power

John was among the thousands of reporters and editors faced with layoffs in the newspaper industry. Even before the recession hit, newspapers were hurting because advertisers and readers were shifting to the internet. When the economy sank, the newspaper business went down faster than anyone expected.

With a daughter in college and another in grade school, John had to keep working. So he transferred from the newspaper's print news team where jobs were disappearing to its growing website team. Over the next six months, he learned how to create and manage a digital news website. It was a challenge mastering the new technology. But John felt he had to adapt.

When the next round of layoffs hit his newspaper, more than one hundred people lost their jobs. John was one of the few who quit on his own terms. You see, while others were swept up by bad events, John stepped up, took control, and rose above his circumstances.

Instead of mourning that his career was dead and buried, he grabbed the shovel and planted the seeds of a new one. Many of his former coworkers went on unemployment. They struggled to make ends meet. But John took his new website skills just a few miles up the road to a local television station. There, he began a new career as the television station's digital media manager, for an even better salary.

At some point, we all face major challenges—the loss of a job, a broken relationship, an illness—that easily could bury us in despair. Negative thoughts can overpower you at such times, bombarding your mind, telling you, It's over. You've seen your best days. Your future is tainted. Your life is ruined.

Yet there is a difference between being buried and being planted. That difference boils down to your expectation of what happens next. When you put a seed in the ground, you don't say, "I'm burying this seed." You say, "I'm planting this seed."

The difference is that when you plant a seed, you expect to see it rise again and come back to life.

Now, there is a time and a place for both burying and planting. Not long ago one of our pet rabbits died. I didn't say, "I'm planting this rabbit." I buried that rabbit. I knew it wasn't coming back. If it did, I sure didn't want to be around.

The time for planting comes when challenges arise. We all face difficulties, but you have the seed of Almighty God on the inside. He breathed His life into you. When you go through disappointments and you're in tough times, you may feel like you've been buried, but the fact is, you've simply been planted. That means you're coming back. And you're not only coming back, you will come back better, increased, stronger.

You go in as a seed, but because of the life of God, you come out blossomed, producing even more fruit.

What was meant for your harm, God will use it to your

advantage.

Jesus talked about this in John 12:24 when he said that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and is planted, it will not produce fruit. You can store a seed on the shelf for a lifetime. It will never become what it was created to be until you put it in the ground. Its potential will never be fully realized until it's planted. As long as it's up on the shelf where it's comfortable, its potential lies dormant.

The same holds true with people facing hard times. You can stay on the shelf. You don't have to stretch. You don't have to deal with adversity. In the meantime, your potential will remain locked up on the inside, dormant.

Only after your seed has been planted and it goes through the process of germination—the outer shell breaks off, the new growth springs forth—will it blossom and produce more fruit.

If you were to ask the seed, it would say, "I don't want to be planted. It's lonely in the dirt. It's dark. It's uncomfortable."

Once in the ground, the seed can't see any light. People walk on top of it. Yet the truth is, it's not buried. It's only planted. When it's underground in that dark time, something supernatural happens. Even packed in tons of soil, the tiny seed cannot be stopped. I can imagine the earth around it, feeling something stirring and confronting that bold seed: "What do you think you're doing? You can't get out. I'm much more powerful than you."

"No, no, no, I know a secret," the seed replies. "I'm not buried. I'm planted. I may be down right now, but it's temporary. I've got the life of God in me. I've got comeback power. I will rise again."

Sure enough, one day that little seed breaks the surface of the earth. It smiles and says, "I told you I was coming out." The seed is no longer buried. No longer hidden and alone. No longer are people walking on top of it. It's got a new beginning. New potential is being realized.

As time goes by, instead of being a little seed buried in the ground, it grows into a beautiful plant producing bright, colorful flowers. What happened? The seed was planted. It had to go through some dark times, some lonely nights. It had to push tons of dirt out of the way. Sometimes, the seed felt that it would never see bright days, but it pressed forward. Eventually, as God intended, His creation burst through the darkness into the light, grew, and flourished.

No matter what comes against you in life, you are not buried. You are planted. You may feel as though you are buried in dirt right now. You're in a tough time. Something was unfair. It seems like your situation will never change.

But if you keep shaking off the dirt, shaking off the self-pity, shaking off the negative thoughts, then you too—like that little seed — will begin to feel the life of God spring forth.

The same power that raised Christ from the dead is on the inside of you. That sickness will tell you: "You can't push me out of the way. I'm much bigger than you. I've got you buried." Don't believe that lie.

Just say, like the seed, "I'm coming back. This economy may have knocked me down. It may have cost me my job. It may have drained my savings. But I'm not buried. I'm planted. I've got comeback power. This is not the end. It's only the beginning."

Or in a different scenario: "I may be lying in the hospital right now, but this sickness is only temporary. This chemo may have taken my strength, my energy, my hair. But know this today: I've got comeback power. This is not the end. It's only the beginning."

When you have faith, your potential is never buried. Know that whomever the Son sets free is free indeed. God has another victory in your future.

Your best days are in front of you.

God will not let you go through more than you can handle. If you have a big challenge today, that just means you have a big destiny. Extraordinary people face extraordinary difficulties. But the good news is we serve an extraordinary God. He has you in the palm of His hand.

In tough times you've got to draw the line in the sand. Make a declaration, *"This difficulty will not bury me. This loss, this disappointment, this injustice, will not cause me to give up on my dreams. I refuse to live in self-pity. I know I am a seed. That means I cannot be buried. I can only be planted. I may be down, but it's only temporary. I'm not only coming back; I will come back better off than I was before."*

I heard a funny story about Farmer Jacob, who had a mule named Caesar that fell into an abandoned well fifty feet deep. Jacob really loved this old mule. But when he surveyed the situation, he realized there was no way to rescue old Caesar.

The well was very narrow and Caesar was crammed at the bottom. The mule had not moved or made a sound. Jacob figured Caesar died in the fall. As much as it bothered him to give up on the mule, he was a practical farmer. He decided to leave Caesar at the bottom of the well and fill it up with dirt.

Jacob called some friends to help shovel dirt down the well. The first shovel load of dirt woke up Caesar, who'd been knocked out. When the mule felt the next load of dirt hit his back, he realized what was going on. But instead of letting himself be buried, Caesar shook it off.

Every time a load of dirt hit his back, the mule shook his body, tossing the dirt to his hooves. Then he'd step out of it.

Caesar kept it up. Shake and step. Shake and step. After nearly an hour of shoveling dirt, Farmer Jacob and his helpers were stunned to see Caesar's ears appear at the top of the well. They realized that the mule was not dead. So they kept shoveling until the old mule stepped out of the well and walked to freedom.

They'd come to bury Caesar, but they raised him instead! When you feel the dirt hit your back, when life treats you unfairly, when you go through disappointments—don't let it bury you. Shake it off and step up.

As that wise mule figured out, the same dirt that could bury you also could be your salvation. In your case, it contains the seeds of your rebirth sent by God to promote you. Your attitude should be "I may be down, but I'm not staying down. This difficulty was meant to destroy me. It was meant to harm me, but I know better. God is using it to my advantage. He's using it to increase me."

Pressure can break you or make you.

Do you know the only difference between a piece of black coal and a priceless diamond is the amount of pressure it has endured? How you handle your adversities will make you or break you. If you get bitter and lose your enthusiasm, you will allow the difficulties of life to bury you. Challenges can keep you from your God-given destiny unless you make the choice to shake them off and step up. When you know you are planted and not buried, you keep pressing forward with a smile on your face.

You know that God is in complete control and you do the right thing even though the wrong thing is happening. Instead of complaining, you have a report of victory. You go around saying, *"This problem will not defeat me. It didn't come to stay. It came to pass. I have strength for everything I need. I'm equipped, empowered, anointed. I am more than a conqueror."*

Kyle fought cancer for ten years. A long-term battle like that can wear anyone down. Yet he took the attitude that his illness would not bury him. Every day he said, "Father, thank you that this too shall pass. Sickness cannot live in my body. My immune system is staging a comeback. My body's soldiers will win the battle."

Kyle always thought of his white blood cells as soldiers. When he was fighting cancer, his doctors "harvested" those cells so they could use them to restore his immune system after chemotherapy. When the doctors told him they needed to do their harvest in a month, Kyle asked them: "How many of my soldiers do you need to make me healthy again?"

They told him a huge number.

"I'll give you double that," Kyle promised. Then, over the next few weeks, he prayed and prayed while envisioning a major army of white blood cell "soldiers" growing in his body. Most cancer patients take it easy during this period. He worked out on the treadmill and with weights every day.

When the doctors did their harvest, they were amazed. Kyle gave them twice the number of white blood cells they needed. His soldiers beat the cancer.

Instead of having the victim mentality, Kyle had a victor mentality. God not only brought him out but made Kyle's life blossom into the fullness of what God had in store.

I've discovered that sometimes the things we get discouraged about are the very things God uses to promote us.

God will not allow a trial to come into your life unless He has a purpose.

He doesn't send the storms, but He uses them. When you're in difficult times, know that this challenge was not sent to destroy you. It was sent to promote you, to

increase you, to strengthen you. You may not see how it will do that, at first, but God has a way. He sends adversity to bring out potential we didn't even know we had.

That's what happened to me. When my father went to be with the Lord in 1999, I felt like I had been buried in my grief. Outside of Victoria, my father was my best friend. I had worked with him closely in the ministry for seventeen years. We traveled all over the world together.

When my dad died, the wind was taken out of my sails. It was a struggle to adjust. But one thing that really helped me was a feeling down deep; I knew this sad event would not bury me. I felt, instead, that my father's passing was planting me; that somehow, someday, God would use this for my good.

There were days, though, when I thought things would never work out. I had to do like King David and just keep encouraging myself. I said, "God, I know You're still on the throne. This loss is not a surprise to You, but You still have something great in my future."

God is faithful. He brought me through that dark time. I discovered potential I didn't know was there. I did not know I could get up here and minister. The loss of my father is when my seed really blossomed. It was meant to destroy me, but God used it to increase me.

Maybe you've been through a loss and you don't see anything bright in your future. It feels like people are walking on top of you. You feel like you've been buried.

Just remember, there is a process taking place.

Like that little planted seed, new growth is springing forth in you—new talent, new determination, new opportunities, new friendships. God is birthing something in you greater than you are right now. Keep reminding yourself, "God is still on the throne. This is not the end. It's only the beginning. I've got comeback power in my DNA."

Don't live with a chip on your shoulder. Don't dwell on your disappointments, on what didn't work out. Bitterness will keep your seed from taking root. Self-pity will hinder your growth. Self-condemnation and feeling unworthy of God's goodness will only limit how high you can go.

Shake off those feelings. Step up into faith. Understand that the only difference between being buried and being planted is what you expect. If you expect that difficulty to be the end of you and you give up on your dreams, then even though you're a seed with the life of Almighty God, even though God has already planned your comeback, because of your own thinking, it won't happen.

I've seen people go through incredible challenges with smiles on their faces. They're hoping, believing, expecting. You know what they're saying? "God, I know I'm not buried. I'm planted, and I can't wait to see what You will do next. I can't wait to see the new doors You'll open, the new friends I'll make, the new opportunities I will have."

If you'll stay in faith like those smiling people, you will rise above your difficulties to a new fullness. You'll see God blossom your life in ways you've never imagined.

That is what happened to Job. He went through a nine-month season when everything that could go wrong did. He lost his business, his health, his family. He looked to be

buried. It appeared that God wasn't concerned about him. It got so bad his wife said, "Job, just curse God and die." She was saying, "Job, it's over. You're done. Just give up."

It's funny. Sometimes the people who should encourage us do just the opposite. Don't let anyone talk you out of your dreams. Don't let someone convince you that you've been buried. Don't listen to the negative news reports so long that you feel defeated and down.

No matter what comes your way, God is not surprised. Your challenge was not sent to bury you. It was sent to increase you. You may not see how good will come of it right now, but God has a way if you stay in faith.

Job was down. But Job was not out. If you read the end of his Bible story, Job came out with twice the blessings he had before. He had twice the livestock, twice the joy, twice the peace, twice the victory. God gave him double for that trouble.

When you're in tough times and everything that could go wrong does, you've got to stay strong and say, "This attack was meant to destroy me, but I've got inside information. It cannot bury me. It's only planting me. And I will come out of it like Job, with double for my trouble."

In James, the Scripture tells how we should wait for God's promises like a farmer waits for his harvest. I've never seen a veteran farmer plant a crop and then worry night and day as to whether it will come up. He doesn't lose sleep at night and say, "Oh, please pray that my corn will take root. Please pray that I'll have a harvest."

No, he waits with a knowing, with a confidence. In fact, he

doesn't necessarily hope that it happens. He doesn't even have to believe that it will happen. He takes it one step further. He knows that his harvest is on its way. He's seen it happen time and time again.

It is not enough to just hope that your situation turns around: "Joel, I hope I get well." Or "I hope my child straightens up." Or "I sure hope I make it through this slow time at the office. It doesn't look good."

Instead, wait for it like a farmer waits for his crops to rise. Wait with a knowing. Wait with a confidence. It's not if but when. Just like the veteran farmer who has planted, watered, and fertilized, you wait with a knowing.

You have stood on God's promises. You have prayed. You have believed. You have watered your seed with your praises. Now it's time to come over into this knowing. It's time to come into an unshakable confidence. It's time for restoration.

If somebody asks you, "You still think you're going to get out of debt with the economy as bad as it is?" Tell that person, I don't think so. I know so. It's just a matter of time.

"Well, you still think that your child will straighten up? He's as wild as can be."

No, I don't think so. I know so. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

"Well, you really think you'll get well? I've never seen you look " bad." (This person must be related to Job's wife.) I don't think I'll get well. I know I'll get well. God is

restoring health unto me.

How about this one? "You really think you will marry someone? You've been single so long."

I don't think so. I know so. God is bringing the right person into my life. He's bringing me divine connections.

You've got to have an unshakable confidence. Just like you know the sun will come up in the morning, you know God will bring about His promises. It may happen this afternoon. It may happen tomorrow, next week, next year, or twenty years from now. But you know that you know—just like that farmer—your harvest is on its way. You've seen God do it in the past, and you know He will do it again in your future.

Scripture says we should wait like Job. Isn't it interesting that of all the people God could have chosen, He chose Job as the example? I believe it's significant. Job was the one who received double. God says that while you're waiting for His promises—when the business is slow, when the medical report doesn't look good—don't just expect to come out the same.

Expect to come out better off than you were before. Expect to come out like Job with twice what you had. In other words, get a bigger vision.

When you put a seed in the ground, it produces more than another, single seed. It produces many more seeds. It doesn't come up equal. If you plant an apple seed, it grows into a big tree with many more apples containing many more seeds. The planted single seed is multiplied over and over. That's what this is saying. We should wait with a

confidence, with a knowing, that you are not only coming out, you will be multiplied, increased, in full blossom.

When you have difficulties, don't talk about your problems— talk about your God.

The Scripture says: "Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered." When you let God arise in your life and you show unshakeable confidence, you are like the farmer waiting for harvest. You know that it will be better than expected. You know down deep that nothing can defeat you. No one can keep you from your destiny. Every set back is only temporary.

Instead of complaining, you say, "I can't wait to see what God will do." When you let God arise, you might as well get ready. Your enemies—sickness, debt, depression, disappointment—will be scattered; none of those enemies can stay.

Let me ask you today, "What are you letting arise? What are you lifting up?"

You may be dealing with hard times. You lost your job. Your retirement fund was cut in half. Stress has made you sick. Your relationships have suffered.

But you can't focus on what happened to you. If you do that, you are letting the wrong things arise. That's defeat, discouragement, self-pity. You need to turn it around and say, "God is still in control. I may be hurting right now, but I know God will bring better days. God is the Restorer of my soul. He's giving me beauty for my ashes.

"I know God is my Provider. He is supplying all of my

needs.

"God is my Vindicator. He will make my wrongs right. He is fighting my battles."

You are not buried. You are planted.

When you let God arise, you can't stay defeated. Your enemies will be scattered. As a young man, Moses had a desire to deliver the people of Israel, but he strayed from God's path when he killed a man. He had to run for his life. He spent forty years on the back side of the desert. It looked like he was buried. It looked like his dreams would never come to pass. The truth is, he wasn't buried. He was simply planted. He was coming back. Those dreams were still alive. During all those years out in the wilderness Moses didn't get bitter. He didn't get discouraged. He knew God was still in control. One day when he was eighty years old, God came and said, Moses, it's time for your comeback. It's time for you to blossom. I've got an assignment for you."

Do you know the latter part of Moses' life was much greater than the first part? You may feel like Moses, like you've made too many mistakes and missed too many opportunities.

But God wants the rest of your life to be the most fulfilling, the most rewarding. Those dreams that you once bail, they didn't die.

They're still alive on the inside. You may have made poor choices, but they didn't bury you. They planted you. God has already arranged your comeback. Now you need to do your part and get your fire back. Quit living condemned.

Quit listening to the accuser reminding you of everything you've done wrong. God knew every mistake you would ever make. The moment you asked Him for forgiveness, He forgave you. And the good news is, He didn't cancel your destiny. He didn't give away your assignment. You need to stand tall and say, *"That's it. I'm not living condemned anymore. If God gave Moses another chance, He'll give me another chance. This is a new day. I'm putting on a new attitude. I know I've not been buried. I've been planted."*

You have comeback power. You've been created to overcome every obstacle, to rise above every challenge. I want you to have confidence so that no matter what comes against you, it cannot defeat you. As long as you're letting God arise, your enemies will be scattered.

The same dirt trying to bury you can be the soil that helps you rise. Learn to shake it off and step up. Remember, in the tough times, that loss, that disappointment, that injustice is not the end. It's a new beginning. Put your shoulders back. Hold your head up high. Dare to declare, *"I'm coming back and I'm coming back better."*

If you do that, then you will come out like Job, with twice what you had before. Those difficulties will give way to new growth, new potential, new talent, new friendships, new opportunities, and new vision. You will see God's blessings bloom in your life in ways you'd never dreamed possible!

CHAPTER 13

Be A Bounce-Back Person

After Hurricane Ike roared through Houston, we lost many huge oak trees, some of them four or five feet around. Those trees, which had looked as sturdy as can be, were no match for the 100-mile-an-hour winds.

I saw pine trees 140 feet tall knocked down in yard after yard. Big trees, small trees, pines, oaks, elms, magnolias were brought down. None of them could withstand those hurricane-force winds.

There was just one type of tree that seemed to fare better than most others in this powerful storm—the skinny, flimsy palm tree. Do you know why palms held up so well?

God designed the palm tree to bend but not break in high winds. The palm tree can bend all the way over until its top touches the ground and still not break. Palms may be bent over for four or five hours during a strong hurricane. You'd think they would snap right off, as thin as they are, but palms are resilient. They bounce right back.

I can imagine Hurricane Ike huffing and puffing and thinking, "I may not be able to uproot you, but at least I will keep you from ever standing up again." That hurricane just kept blowing. Old Ike thought he'd blown those palms off their roots. But when the hurricane ran out of steam, when Ike's winds died down, the palms

bounced back!

After the storm, the palms around Houston just rose up, fanned out their fronds, took a deep breath, and said, "Well, that was a nice breeze. Hey, where'd all the oaks and magnolias go?"

Why is that? God put bounce-back in the palm tree. It may get bent over by the forces of nature, but it is only a matter of time before the palm stands tall once again. Palm trees don't sweat storms. They weather them. During Hurricane Ike, our palm trees were not worried. They weren't depressed or thinking, Oh, no. Another hurricane. This will be the one. I'm sure it will tear me up by the roots.

Our palms were at peace. Our other trees were going down left and right, but the palm takes pride in its resilience. Palms know Almighty God put bounce back in their bark.

I learned something even more amazing about palms. Biologists say that during a hurricane when the palm tree is being bent and pushed over, its root system is actually strengthened by the stress, which gives it new opportunities for growth.

When the storm is over, the palm tree smiles and says, "I knew this would be a bad one. I knew I would be battered. But what do you know? I came back up stronger than I was before. Now, if you will excuse me, I think I'll grow a little taller."

Bend with hard times and then grow.

That's what God says will happen to each of us, if we just stay in faith. Psalm 92:12 says: "The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree."

Isn't that interesting? God could have said we would flourish like the mighty oak trees—big, sturdy, with great branches. Or God might have said we'd flourish like pine trees—tall and majestic, able to see for miles!

But God chose palm trees because He knew there would be difficult times in which we would have to bend so we wouldn't break. He knew things would come against us, trying to steal our joy, our victory. So God said, "You will be like a palm tree, because I've put a bounce back in your spirit."

The storms of life will come. The winds will blow. At times, it might look like you're finished, like it's all over for you. You might get a bad report about your health. You might be passed over for a promotion or laid off. Other times, it might appear that your dream has died. But just like that palm tree, when the storm is over, you will not stay down. You will bounce back and keep growing.

We all face disappointments and setbacks. But the key is to develop a bounce-back mentality.

When you get knocked down, don't stay down. Get up to fight another day. Disappointments hit. Disruptions happen. But pity parties are not the answer.

God has promised that what was meant to harm you, He will use for your good.

When you're a bounce-back person, you know that every

adversity, every setback is only temporary. It will not last forever. Weeping may endure for a night, but you know joy is coming in the morning. So you don't sit around complaining, thinking about how bad it was and everything you've lost.

God is a God of restoration. He has promised to pay you back double for every unfair situation. Instead of being discouraged by the difficulty, you are encouraged by challenges because you know you will receive double for your trouble! Yes, despite your challenges today, tomorrow you will come out better off than you were before.

Bounce-back people have the seed of Almighty God. The same power that raised Christ from the dead lives inside of you. No challenge is too difficult for you. No obstacle is too high to overcome. No sickness, no disappointment, no person, no hurricane, no dive in the stock market can keep you from your God-given destiny.

The enemy may have done his best, but his best will never be enough. If you stay in faith, what was meant to stop you will not be a stumbling block but rather a stepping-stone taking you to a higher level.

Get your hopes up.

You are not average. You are not ordinary. You are a child of the Most High God. Life may have dealt you a tough blow. At times it may feel like the wind is out of your sail. But the good news is Almighty God has put a bounce back in your spirit.

When you are tempted to give up on your dreams, when

you want to simply settle where you are, something down in your soul says, No way. This is not who I am. I was created to live in victory. I was created to overcome this sickness. I was created to rise above these problems.

Why is that? You are a child of God. When times are tough, you can't sit back and feel sorry for yourself. You have bounce-back in your blood. I may be knocked down, but I didn't get knocked out. I recognize this setback is simply a setup for a greater comeback. And it's just a matter of time before I come back stronger, healthier, better than I was before.

No weapon formed against you will ever prosper.

Proverbs 24:16 says that a good person may fall seven times, yet the Lord will raise him up. One of my staff members has a family member, Chris, who had three battles with cancer before his fortieth birthday. His most recent fight was the worst. They found a tumor wrapped around his spine. Things looked dark for Chris, who is married with three young children. But Chris is one of those upbeat people who bend without breaking. His favorite shirts have a logo that says: Life is good!

Chris was knocked down and laid low by a deadly disease that third time. Because of the tumor's location, chemotherapy was not an option. He prayed and every night, for inspiration, he read my mother's book on surviving cancer.

Then one day Chris got an unexpected call from a major cancer center. Doctors there said that his previous fights with cancer qualified him for a special, experimental program. He was given a new test drug that targets only

cancer cells.

The experimental drug wiped out the tumor without making Chris the least bit sick. He bounced back! Life is good!

The winds may be blowing in your own life today. Dark clouds may be hovering. Maybe you too have a health issue, maybe your job was downsized, maybe one of your family members has gone astray.

Your attitude should be, "It's just a matter of time before this turns around. This sickness may have me down, but I'm not staying down. God is restoring health back to me. Life is good!"

Times may be tough. The storm may be raging. But your faith will allow you to bend without breaking. You are righteous. You do your best to please God. When this storm is over, you will not be broken or flat on the ground. You will not be defeated or depressed. You will be stronger, healthier, increased, and promoted!

Declare your good health, your freedom, and your victory.

I often hear from hospital patients who watch our services on television. Many of them are dealing with serious illnesses. I tell them never to view their illness as a permanent condition. Too often we become overwhelmed by illness and other discouragements. Sometimes, we concede the battle even though we have a fighting chance. I encourage you to be a fighter.

Announce to the enemy: *"This cancer is not welcome in my*

body. It goes against the blessings that God has put on the inside. It is a trespasser. It is on private property. And as a child of the Most High God I have the authority to say, 'Cancer, you've got to go back. You will not defeat me. You will not steal my joy. You will not take one day of my divine destiny.'"

Every morning you need to say, *"Father, I want to thank you that health and healing is flowing through my system, that sickness and disease cannot live in me."* Remember, you are like a palm tree. Yes, the wind is blowing, but it cannot break you. It cannot topple you. It can only bend and strengthen you.

My friend, as a child of God, you have bounce-back in your spirit. If you'll stay in agreement with God, no matter how fierce the winds, they cannot uproot you. They cannot break you. They cannot topple you. When the storms pass and it's all said and done, you'll be able to say, "I'm still standing. I came right back up."

Hard time is not for all time.

Don't accept difficult days as the way it will always be. You may be a little bent right now because of hard winds, but that's not permanent. Those winds, that storm, that trouble, that sickness, will not last forever. When the ill winds stop blowing, and they will, know that this too shall pass.

You will rise again. Why? You've got that bounce-back power.

Life will hand you disappointments and setbacks. But we are not like an oak tree that can be toppled over. We're

not like a pine tree that can be blown down. You and I are like the palm tree. We may get battered and beat up, but we will return stronger than we were before.

There is an interesting scripture in Jeremiah 5:22. It says that God has put a decree in every grain of sand. The decree commands the sand to keep the ocean within its boundaries. The ocean will not cross over it. In the natural, that doesn't make a lot of sense. The sand is nothing compared to the ocean. The ocean is massive and powerful, yet the tiny little grain of sand, because of God's decree, can keep the oceans in its boundaries.

I can imagine the sand and the ocean having a conversation. The ocean says, "Little sand, do you really think you can contain me? I am billions and billions of times more massive and more powerful than you. There is no way in the world you can keep me in my boundaries."

The sand replies, "Listen here, Mr. Ocean. It doesn't matter how big or small I am. It doesn't matter what I have or don't have. All that matters is, Almighty God has put a decree in me. Thanks to Him, I have the power to hold you back."

The sand's bragging angers the ocean. It churns and roils, creating the perfect storm. The storm sends the ocean waves over the sands, beyond the normal boundaries. The ocean laughs and taunts the sand. "I told you so. I told you that you could never contain me."

But the sand is not upset. The little sand doesn't dial 911. It doesn't say, "God, I thought You put the promise in me." No, all the grains of sand on that beach begin singing in

unison, like a huge church choir. "You've got to go back." And sure enough, as soon as the storm is over, as soon as the wind quits blowing, the ocean retreats to its normal boundaries. Not because the sand is bigger. Not because the sand is more powerful. But because God put a decree in the sand.

Triumph is your birthright!

In the same way, God has put a decree in each one of us. When you were created, God put His blessing upon you. It says, *"You are prosperous. You are healthy. You are strong. You are talented."*

God's decree is implanted in the very core of your makeup. It states, *"God always causes you to triumph. Those for you are greater than those against you."*

If you'll get in agreement with God in your thoughts, in your attitudes, in the words you speak, in your actions, then His decree will override anything on the outside.

Like that little sand, when you feel overwhelmed, when life deals you a tough blow, your attitude should be: "You gotta go back!"

"Well, Joel," you might say, "The doctor said I might as well learn to live with this sickness. Nothing more they can do."

No, every day you need to tell that sickness: "You have to go back. I'm well. I'm healthy. With long life God satisfies me."

"Well, Joel, when the stock market went down, I lost a

bunch. I don't know what to do now."

No, you need to say: "I'm blessed. I'm prosperous. God is opening up the windows of Heaven. His favor surrounds me. I can't outrun the good things of God."

Instead of talking about the problem, you need to speak to that problem.

I hear people say things like, "My arthritis is really acting up today." I understand what they mean, but dwelling on the problem won't bring a solution. Don't talk about it. Talk to it. Just say, "Listen here, arthritis. You have to go back. You're not welcome in my body. My body is a temple of the Most High God. You have to find somewhere else to live, because health and healing are the only things I allow in me."

"I've struggled with depression for years." Or "I've had this addiction since I was a teenager."

No, get a new perspective. Talk to that trouble: "Listen here, alcohol, nicotine, drugs. You've controlled me long enough. This is a new day. I am drawing the line in the sand. I know whomever the Son sets free is free indeed."

God watches over His children.

He holds us in the palm of His hand. God knows every struggle, every lonely night, every unfair situation. A little sparrow cannot fall to the ground without God knowing about it. How much more is God concerned about you and me, His sons and daughters? The Scripture says: "When the enemy comes in like a flood ..." That means when you feel overwhelmed, when the hurricane hits,

and the stock market dips, what does God do?

He doesn't say, "Too bad. I told you life was hard. You should have made better decisions." No, when the enemy comes in like a flood, God raises up a barrier. In other words, that gets God's attention. He does not sit back and make us fight our battles on our own. That's when God steps up to turn things in our favor.

When you see a child in trouble, you don't think twice. You just naturally stop what you are doing and go to help the child in need. When our son Jonathan was about two years old, we were in the grocery store with him. I'd left him with the cart as I strolled down to the end of the aisle. I was only about forty or fifty feet away. I could still see him. But while I was looking for something, he knocked a few cereal boxes off the bottom shelves, making a little mess. It was no big deal. But this employee came around the corner and lost it. She jumped down Jonathan's throat.

"Listen here, young man," she scolded. "You need to learn to keep your hands to yourself. And you may not make a mess in this store."

On and on, she went, letting my son have it beyond anything he deserved.

Something rose up in me. I don't know if it was God or the devil. But it sure felt good. I consider myself a nice person. I'm kind. I'm friendly. I'll help anybody with anything. But when somebody messes with my children, that is a different story.

I don't know if you've ever seen the Incredible Hulk, but

mild mannered Pastor Joel had a little of the Hulk going on that day! One minute, I was this normal-looking guy in the cereal section, Then, all of a sudden I underwent this superhero transformation.

No, my shirt didn't rip apart from bulging muscles. My skin did not turn green. But that's how I felt! I was ready to take on a tiger.

You can mess with me. You can say, "Joel is too this, too that." No big deal. It doesn't bother me. It bounces off me. But if you mess with my children, you've got Pastor Hulk on your hands!

I may not be big and green, but dynamite comes in small packages.

Our Heavenly Father is the same way when it comes to protecting His children. When the enemy wages in on the attack, whether he sends sickness to attack your body, somebody to mistreat you, or the wrong things to happen despite your effort to do right; whatever the challenge, God doesn't sit back and say, "Too bad."

No, God steps up and says, "Hey, you're messing with the wrong person. That's My child. That's My son. That's My daughter. If you mess with them, you are messing with Me. And who am I? Well, I am the all-powerful Creator of the universe."

God looks at your enemies and says in effect, "You want some of this? Go ahead and make my day." God says, "I am your protection. I am your deliverer. I am your healer. I am your strength. I am your wisdom. I am your victory."

You are not alone. In the toughest of times, you've got backup, way up! Almighty God has your back. He's got a hedge of protection around you, a bloodline that the enemy cannot cross. Nothing you are going through can keep you from your God-given destiny. You have bounced back before and you will do it again. You may be a little bent because of the strong winds, but the good news is, you're not broken and you will bounce back again.

I love the way David put it: *"God lifted me out of the horrible pit . . . and put a new song in my mouth."*

God will lift you in the same way. Where you are now is not where you will always be. There are brighter days up ahead. Favor, promotion, increase; no good thing will God withhold, because you walk uprightly.

Still, remember you must do your part. Put a new song in your heart. Sing the song of victory. If somebody asks you how you're doing, don't give them a detailed report of every ache, pain, leak, and overdue bill.

Your attitude should be, *"I'm too blessed to be stressed. I'm healthy. My family is well. Life is good."*

Finally, remember that each setback offers the time to plan a comeback. In the middle of the adversity, in the middle of the tough time, you need to start making your list of who you will invite to your victory celebration.

It's time for restoration.

That means if you're in the hospital, you need to start planning what you'll do when you are released. Or maybe the hurricane damaged your house. You need to make an

invitation list to your party.

"What party, Joel?"

The party you will have when you move into your new home. Or when you show off your new furniture or your new carpet.

Maybe you lost some when the stock market went down. I heard somebody say, "Our 401 (k)s were turned into 201 (k)s." Listen, you need to start planning your coming-out-of-debt party. It may not look like it in the natural, but we serve a supernatural God.

"Well, Joel. Have you seen the stock market?"

"Yes, but have you seen our God? He is the Lord our provider."

It doesn't say the economy is our provider, the stock market, even our job. God is our provider. And the good news is, God is not having a down year. I'm happy to report the economy in Heaven is doing just fine. Don't plan on having a 201(k), but how about a 601(k), a 1201(k)? Just as it went down, it can certainly go up.

The Scripture says: "Lift up your head . . . that the King of glory will come in. Who is the King of glory? . . . The Lord mighty in battle."

If you want God to fight your battles for you, lift up your head. Get a vision of yourself rising higher and higher. Your life will follow your vision, so look up. If you lift up your head, the Lord mighty in battle will come in. And when God shows up, every adversity will be turned to

victory. Every battlefield will be turned to a blessing field.

My friend, you are among the righteous. From time to time you may bend, but like the palm tree, you will bounce back. Let me declare it over you.

You will bounce back from every disappointment. You will bounce back from every sickness. You will bounce back from relationship problems. You will bounce back from financial difficulties. You will bounce back from depression.

Your setback was simply a setup for a greater comeback. You may be a little bit bent right now, but it's only a matter of time before you come back stronger, healthier, increased, promoted, better off than you were before!

CHAPTER 14

Living A Resurrected Life

As a young man, Nick was angry with God, angry with his circumstances, and even tempted to take his own life. For a time, Nick considered his own birth a mistake because he came into this world with no arms and no legs.

Doctors could find no medical reason for his lack of limbs. His mother was a nurse who was very careful during her pregnancy. Nick was an otherwise healthy and highly intelligent young man.

You can imagine how difficult it was for Nick to accept what he felt was a mistake. He endured taunts, teasing, and cruelty from other children and even adults. Nick went through all sorts of emotional pain as he tried to understand what God had in mind for him in a world of people with arms and legs.

Yet despite his pain and his struggles, Nick eventually put his life in God's hands. And God transformed this "mistake" into a great miracle. Today, Nick Vujicic travels around the world inspiring and uplifting people with his message of hope and faith.

"If God doesn't give you a miracle, you can be a miracle to someone else," he says. "And when you become a miracle for another person, you start down the road to leading a richer, fuller life."

Everyone goes through adversity. We've all had hard times. Maybe you were struck down by an illness or laid

off from your job. Your savings were cut in half. A relationship went bad.

It's easy to become negative and bitter and to lose your enthusiasm for life. So many people live in the past and focus on who hurt them. They have a victim mentality, always blaming someone else.

You are not defined by your past. You are prepared by your past.

Every challenge you've been through, every adversity you've faced, God deposited something on the inside. Your character was being developed. Strength was being increased. Vision was being enlarged. With every difficulty, you can experience a new level of God's goodness. You may have had unfair things happen; somebody did you wrong, or maybe poor choices brought trouble upon you. But your past does not define you. Your past prepares you for a better future.

One of the best things I've learned is that nothing happens to me; it happens for me. God would not have allowed me to go through difficult times if He didn't have a purpose for them. He wouldn't have allowed adversity to come if He didn't already have a plan for good to come of it.

Even though you are going through challenges, even though something seems unfair, if you keep the right attitude, it will help you become who you were created to be and take you where you are supposed to go.

Nothing in your life is an accident. All things work together for your good. It doesn't say that everything is good. You may be uncomfortable. Things may be taking

longer than you wanted. But if you stay in faith, God will use your challenges for your good.

Live a resurrected life.

Jesus endured pain on the cross by focusing on the joy set before Him. What are you focusing on today: What didn't work out? Who hurt you? How unfair it was? Or, are you focusing on your dreams and your goals, knowing that your best days are still in front of you?

Even though adversities may look like stumbling blocks, God can use them as stepping-stones to take you to a higher level. Everything you've gone through in life—every adversity, every lonely time—God was doing something on the inside. He is preparing you.

You wouldn't be who you are today; you wouldn't have the depth, the maturity, the insight were it not for those challenges that forced you to grow. Keep your life in a positive perspective. We are not defined by our pasts. You are not defined by how you were raised, or by how you were treated, or even by the mistakes you've made.

So shake off self-pity. Shake off bitterness. Shake off hurt. You may have seen one of your dreams die. Maybe you lost a job, your savings, or a loved one. But failures and losses are part of life, not the end of it. Jesus died, was buried, and then rose again. That is how God works. You've been through death. You've been through the burial. Now it is the third day. It is time for your resurrection.

If you want to live a resurrected life, you must have a resurrected mentality. In other words: "I may have been

cheated in a business deal, but I'm not bitter. I'm not sour. I know that didn't happen to me. That happened for me. God said He would be my vindicator. God said He would pay me back double for every injustice. So I will not drag around defeated. I will stay in faith knowing that the hard times just qualified me for double the blessings."

Maybe you've been dealing with poor health for a long time. Your medical report doesn't look good. You could be down and discouraged. But instead, tell yourself: "I know this isn't happening to me. It's happening for me. God is in complete control. And I believe He will turn it around, He will make me better off than I was before."

Stay in faith.

Maybe you've made poor choices. You've made some mistakes and opened the door to trouble. Now comes the condemning voice. The accuser tells you, "You blew it. It's your fault. You can't expect anything good."

No, you've got to shake that off and say, "I may have brought trouble upon myself, but I know God's mercy is bigger than any mistakes I've made. I will not live with guilt. I will not give up on my dreams. I know I'm growing. I'm learning. And in the end, God will use it all to my advantage."

Develop this resurrection mentality. You are a child of the Most High God. Nothing can happen to you. It can only happen for you. It's all a part of God's plan. Even when it doesn't seem fair, God said in Isaiah 61:3 that He will give you beauty for your ashes, joy for your mourning.

You may feel you've been handed a bunch of ashes. None

of your dreams have come to pass. That simply means you've been through the death. You've been through the burial. Now it's time for restoration. The good news is that it's not over until God says it's over.

He still can bring your dreams to pass. Why don't you get in agreement with Him? Reject the victim mentality. When you have the right perspective, you take away all the power of the enemy. When things turn against you, in the natural, you may get down and discouraged. You may complain and feel defeated.

But you need to understand that eventually God will create good out of it. Even though your life may be difficult now, God is depositing something on the inside. Once you understand that, you can wear a smile even when your plans don't work out. You can be at peace even when you should be stressed out.

You can be good to people even when they are not good to you.

You may have a boss, a friend, a child who is difficult to get along with. Sometimes you have to look at difficult people and just say it in faith, "You are not happening to me. You are happening for me." They may not understand it, but don't bother explaining it to them.

This may seem funny, but I need to thank some of my enemies. I need to write them a check. They don't realize how God has used them to stretch me, to grow me, to help me have greater confidence in Him. When we were trying to acquire the Compaq Center in Houston for our church, one of the major business leaders in the city told a friend of mine, "It will be a cold day in hell before Lakewood

ever gets the Compaq Center."

That man doesn't know what he did for me. I should buy him dinner (McDonald's, probably). I don't know if we would have one of the country's largest churches today if it were not for him. God used him to light a new fire on the inside, to give me a new determination, a new passion. He didn't happen to me. He happened for me.

At first I was thinking, Wow. We've got a lot of things coming against us. It looks like our opponents are very big, very powerful. But I had to shake that off and say, "No. If God be for us, who dare be against us? The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

Too many times people give up on their dreams without a fight. They stop believing. I've seen people miss out on God's best because they never move beyond the burial stage. They are hit with a disappointment, and instead of burying it and knowing that God has another plan, instead of getting a fresh vision for their life, they wallow in self-pity.

You will never reach your resurrection, you will never enter phase three if you don't keep going beyond the death and the burial. You must have the attitude: I did my best. I gave it my all.

If your plan did not work out for some reason, tell yourself, "I will not sit around the rest of my life and mourn over something I cannot change. That's over and done. So I'll regroup. I'll refocus. I know I've been through the death. I've been through the burial. I'm preparing for my resurrection. I'm getting ready for the new things God will do in my life."

Trust in God's plan.

The reason God closes a door even when we're walking in obedience and being our best is because He has something better in store. But when we get sour because things don't go our way—when we are bitter, offended, and negative—that stops God from bringing His blessings. We have to say, "God, even though I didn't get my way, I trust You. I know You know what's best for me. And I believe that at the right time You will give me the desires of my heart."

Victoria and I fixed up our first house, sold it, and moved to a bigger place a few years after we were married. The people who thought our house filed a lawsuit against us after they moved in. They had a problem with the outside sewer. They not only sued us; they also sued the builder, the architect, the Realtor, the plumber, and everybody else they could think of.

We'd done nothing wrong. We were not at fault. But I was so upset over this lawsuit. The case went on for months. I had to give a deposition, and I was stressed out and nervous. It seemed like the worst thing that ever happened to me. After the two-hour deposition, I was so nauseated I couldn't even drive home.

Then about six months later, the lawsuit was thrown out. Victoria and I were cleared. Yet I'd spent that whole six months thinking how bad things were because of the lawsuit brought against us. I kept thinking it wasn't fair. The lawsuit was just a waste of our time, I thought.

Nearly three years later, I realized what God was up to.

When we signed the church's lease for the Compaq Center, some other company filed a lawsuit to prevent us from moving in. This time, I took the lawsuit in stride. I realized that God had prepared me with the legal troubles over our former house.

When I gave my deposition for the Compaq Center lawsuit, I was as calm as could be. I would not have been nearly as confident in facing this much bigger lawsuit if it hadn't been for my earlier experience. Going through tough times, you don't know what God may be preparing you for. So don't be shortsighted and think, Oh, God. Why is this happening? This is not fair.

God challenges you to help you grow.

Know that God would not have allowed a challenge to happen if He did not plan for something good to come from it. It may be ten years before you realize the benefit that God provided.

You may be fighting a challenge right now, something that's got you stressed out. If God were to take it away, you wouldn't be prepared for what He has in store. It would keep you from reaching the level He's trying to get you to. Keep it all in perspective. That job you lost, that family member who is hard to get along with, it's not happening to you. It's happening for you. God is getting you prepared for greater levels of blessing.

Your attitude has a great impact on whether you move forward on God's path or stay put. Don't go around complaining, "God, why am I always getting these bad breaks?" Instead, stay in faith. Just say, "God, I know You're in complete control of my life. And no matter how

tempted I am to be disappointed, I will not be a victim. I will not be negative, blaming other people. I know You've got me in the palm of Your hand. And I believe one day I will look out and see how this has all turned out for my benefit."

A pastor friend of mine told me about a man in his congregation who was always complaining, always in need. My friend finally got tired of it. He prayed, "God, would you just move this man to another church? He is draining all my strength and energy, taking all my time."

The pastor told me he heard God speak to him deep down inside. God said to him: "I won't move him from your church. That man has kept you on your knees praying like nothing I've ever seen before!"

It's not happening to you. It's happening for you. The fact is, we grow in difficult times. That's when character is developed. Yes, it's fun to be on the mountaintop where it's easy, but you are not being stretched. Growth comes when you have to overlook an insult, forgive a wrong, and do the right thing even when the wrong thing is happening.

I'm not saying anyone should ask for tough times. But when they come my way, I've already made up my mind that I will not grow sour. I'll not be bitter. I'll be better. I'll know God is trying to deposit something on the inside.

I love what David said, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ..." He didn't say: "Though I live in the valley." Or "Though I'm stuck in the valley." Or "Though I'll probably die in the valley."

No, he described this valley as temporary. He said, "I will not die with these problems. This too shall pass." The fact is, everyone faces challenges at some point, whether you have health problems, financial difficulties, or a struggling relationship. We all have something in the natural that could steal our joy and cause us to be worried. But we've got to keep things in perspective, like David, and say, "No, I'm going through this. This didn't come to stay. It came to pass."

If you are dealing with a challenge, you need to remind yourself all through the day: "This is temporary. I may be lonely right now, but I will not stay lonely. I know God will bring the right person into my life."

Or "I may be wounded emotionally. I may be hurting on the inside. But I will not stay wounded. I know God is the restorer of my soul. He will bring healing and give me beauty for these ashes."

Encourage yourself. Don't settle in the valley of darkness. That is not your permanent address. Psalm 84:6 says that passing through the valley of weeping, you will find pools of blessings.

God will turn tears into pools to refresh you.

You'll look up and think, I should be down. I should be stressed out. I have so much working against me. But I'm happy. I'm at peace. I'm expecting good things.

Why is that? It's because you're tapping into those pools of blessings and God is refreshing you.

I know sometimes when you go through loss, it is easy to

feel like you have been robbed. Maybe you lost a loved one, a marriage; maybe your childhood was unhappy because of a bad environment. When you experience a loss, you can have one of two attitudes. You can say, "God, this isn't fair. Why did this happen? It doesn't make any sense." You can be bitter and negative, and live with anger in your heart.

But a much better approach is to take that loss and sow it as a seed. Just say, "God, I don't really know why this has happened to me. I don't know why this has been taken away. But God, I will not allow anyone or anything to steal from me. I'm giving it to You as a seed, trusting that You will bring me a harvest."

Maybe you lost your job in the recession. Just say, "God, nobody stole my job from me. I know You control the whole universe. And even though it wasn't right, God, I'm giving it to You as a seed, trusting that You will bring me an even better job."

Or maybe a relationship didn't work out for you. If that's the case, say, "God, I will not be bitter for the rest of my life. I won't dwell on the months and the years I've wasted. I'm giving this relationship to You as a seed, believing that You will bring me divine connections, that You will guide the right people into my life."

Turn it over to God. Give it to Him and you'll be amazed at what kind of harvest He can bring.

Before Jesus came to the resurrection, He endured the Garden of Gethsemane, the road to Golgotha, and death on the cross. Those were His biggest challenges. And they led to His greatest moment. Many times on the way to our

dreams being fulfilled, we go through these same types of experiences.

When Jesus prayed for Peter, He didn't pray that he would never have to deal with challenges. He prayed that His faith would remain strong. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was so distraught over what He was about to face. He was in such agony in His spirit that He sweated great drops of blood. He said, "Father, if You're willing, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not My will, Yours be done."

It was there in the garden that Jesus made a decision to hold on to the promise that God put in His heart. There, deep inside, a war was under way. Everything within Him was telling Jesus, I will not make it. There's no way. It's too tough. But when Jesus made the decision to stay in faith, God sent an angel to strengthen Him.

You may feel like you're in the garden right now. It may seem that the world has turned against you. You cannot seem to find a way through your hard times in the natural. But God is saying, "Hold on to that promise. Keep believing. Keep hoping. Keep praying. You are close to your victory."

On the road to His crucifixion, Jesus was forced to carry his own cross. But He had been so beaten down, so mistreated, He couldn't carry it the whole way. He fell down under the weight of His cross. The message is that you don't have to be strong 100 percent of the time.

Sometimes the weight of your burdens will force you to your knees. Do not despair. The accusing voice will tell you that you are not strong enough if every day is not a perfect day, if you don't stay in faith every minute, if you

don't keep your joy and peace at all times.

Yet remember that even Jesus fell under the weight of His cross. Simon came to his aid. He helped Jesus carry His burden. God also will send someone to be there for you in your time of greatest need.

Maybe today it's my voice lifting you: "You can make it. There are better days up ahead."

But the enemy will try to hold you down: "You had a bad day. You had a pity party. You lost your temper. You yelled at your kids."

God wants to ease your burden. He is saying, "That's okay. You're human. I know what it feels like to fall down. I've been there. Just get back up again. You've got a resurrection coming."

They nailed Jesus to the cross. And as He hung there, He felt so lonely, so dejected, He cried out, "My God, My God. Why have You forsaken Me?"

Jesus asked a question, but He didn't hear an answer. Sometimes Heaven can be silent. You pray. You believe you are doing your best, but you don't see anything happening. You're hurting on the inside. Your life may appear to be over. But in those silent times something powerful is happening deep inside. God is stretching you. You're developing a greater confidence in Him.

Your mind may tell you, "It's over. Your dream will never hap pen." But something will rise up in your spirit that says, "No, God is still on the throne. This is not happening to me. It's happening for me. And even though it doesn't

seem fair, even though I'm discouraged, deep down I know my resurrection is coming. I know God can still turn this around."

As Jesus hung on the cross in all that pain, the soldiers made fun of Him. They mocked and ridiculed Him. Yet in spite of all His suffering, in spite of the disrespect, He looked up to Heaven and said, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

Jesus forgave His enemies. Then He committed His spirit into His Father's hands. They put Him in the grave. I'm sure the forces of darkness were celebrating, rejoicing, thinking they had finally won the victory. But they didn't realize it's not over until God says it's over.

God always has the final say. He controls the universe. Jesus was buried on Friday. Three days later, on Sunday morning, He rose from His grave.

"I am He that lives," Jesus said. "I was dead, but I am alive forevermore. Because I live, you can live also."

God has an abundant life in store for each one of us. But many times on the way to your victories, just like Jesus, you will experience setbacks and difficult times. Remind yourself, "It's not happening to me. It's happening for me. God is preparing me. On the inside He is depositing strength, courage, and ability."

Keep your eyes focused on your "right now" goals.

It says in Hebrews: "Now faith is ... " You must have a "now" mentality. Do not fall into the "one day" mentality: "One day I will be happy," "One day God will work in my

life."

Now is the time to release your faith. Right now, God is working in your life. Right now, God is arranging things in your favor. Right now, God is filling you with His strength.

Stay in the now. That's what activates God's power.

When Jesus arrived at Bethany four days after Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, had died, He encountered the sisters crying and distraught. Jesus comforted Martha with the words: "I am the resurrection and the life."

"Yes, Jesus," Martha said, "I know in the last days You will raise our brother Lazarus from the dead when we all go to Heaven."

Jesus said in effect, "No, Mary. No, Martha. I'm not talking about in the last days. I'm talking about today. If you'll roll away the stone, I will raise your brother right now."

Jesus was saying, "I am a right now God."

Often, we settle into that one day frame of mind: "One day God will do something great in my life." "One day God will resurrect my dead dreams."

Break free of that mentality. Believe that today God will do something great. Today God will open supernatural doors. Have a now mentality.

You may have been through the death, so to speak. You've been through the burial. You've been hurt, disappointed, discouraged, or downed by sickness or heartbreak. But God didn't take you through those challenges just to leave

you beaten down, bedraggled, or half-dead.

"Well, how you doing, brother?"

"Oh, pretty good under the circumstances."

No, it's time for your resurrection. It's time for you to rise up and take everything that belongs to you. If you've been crucified with Christ, you can be raised with Christ. The enemy may have done his best, but his best will never be enough.

Shake off the past. Shake off every disappointment. Shake off every injustice. Shake off every failure. Let today be a new beginning. You may feel like you're in the garden, down and discouraged. But take heart. Your resurrection is coming. You may have fallen down under the weight of your cross. God is saying, "Get back up. You're close to your victory."

You may even feel like you're on the cross: Your dreams have died. Everything is coming against you. But you must take a new perspective. Nothing in life has happened to you. It has happened for you.

God has you in the palm of His hand. He will take what was meant to destroy you and use it to thrust you into your divine destiny. Remember, you are not defined by your past. You are prepared by your past. Every adversity, every obstacle is God depositing something on the inside.

If you'll live this resurrected life, you will live in victory. Even when things come against you, you'll still have a smile on your face. You'll know God is not only turning your life around, He is giving you beauty for ashes, joy for

mourning, and in the end you will come out stronger, happier, healthier—better off than you were before.

CHAPTER 15

Your Sunday Is Coming

Whenever we discuss the resurrection of Christ, I think about when they crucified Jesus on that dark Friday. It was the most painful, discouraging day of His life. In fact, it was so bad, earlier Jesus sweated great drops of blood.

It looked like His days were over. Most thought His enemies had the best of Him. But God had other plans. They put the body of Jesus in the grave on Friday and they celebrated their victory.

But Sunday morning was a different story.

The grave could not hold Him. Death could not contain Him. The forces of darkness could not stop Him. On the third day Jesus came out of the grave and He said, "I was dead, but now I am alive forevermore."

One principle the resurrection teaches us is that God will always finish what He started. No matter how dark it looks, no matter how long it's been, no matter how many people are trying to push us down, if we stay in faith, God will take us from Friday to Sunday.

He will complete what He started.

You may feel like it's a Friday in your life right now. The economic downturn has hurt so many people. For some already struggling, it has added more stress, more burdens.

You may have major obstacles in your path. You can't see how you will ever accomplish your dreams, or how you can recover your health, or resolve your problems. Negative thoughts are bombarding you: It's over. Just accept it. It will never be any better.

It may feel like Friday, but my encouragement is: Sunday is coming.

God is a faithful God. The promises He put in your heart—that you will be healthy, that you're coming out of debt, that your family will be restored, that you'll have a supernatural year—God has every intention of bringing to pass. He is called the author and the finisher of our faith.

God will never start something that He cannot finish.

When God put the dream in your heart—a dream to start a business, to find a better job, to be in ministry—the good news is that He already has a completion date. God can already see it done. You may not see how it can happen. It may be taking a long time. All the odds appear to be against you. But if you'll just keep believing, keep praying, keep being your best, then God promises He will finish what He started.

He will take you from Friday to Sunday. Your children may have served God when they were younger, but now they've gotten off course. They're not doing what is right. Well, God is saying, "Get ready. They're coming back." It may be today. It may be next month. It may be next year. But it will happen. God finishes what He starts.

Maybe you have a dream to get out of debt, to pay off your

house, to be free from that burden, but it looks impossible. The economy is down. Business is slow. You've gone as far as your education allows.

But God is saying, "I'm not limited by those things. I've got resurrection power. I can give you one break that will thrust you to a new level. I can open doors that no man can shut. I can bring talent out of you that you didn't know you had. I can send people who will go out of their way to be good to you."

Keep believing, and you will come into supernatural increase.

Maybe you're single and have a desire to meet somebody. You've been through a couple of relationships that didn't work out. Now it's been a long time. Your thoughts are telling you, You're never going to meet anybody. You're washed up. You had your chance.

No. God is saying, "I've already picked out the right person. I'm lining up things in your favor. I'm causing you to be at the right place at the right time. You will see that promise come to fulfillment."

God finishes what He starts. Is there something that once excited you? Are there dreams you've abandoned? Goals you've let go? If a dream has taken too long and disappointments have made us complacent, we sometimes accept that "It's probably not going to happen for me."

The first place we lose the battle is in our minds. You may think: I could never start that business, Joel. I don't get any good breaks. I could never get a new house. I can't

even sell my old house. I'll never go back to college. I don't have the funds.

Just because you gave up on your dream doesn't mean God gave up on you. God never abandons a dream. The dream He put in your heart may be buried under disappointments, setbacks, failures, and rejections. But know this: The seed is still alive. The promise is still in you.

Fan that flame. Get your fire back. It may look like your dream is dead, but the fact is, it's not buried. It's planted. That means it's coming back!

Your attitude should be: "This may take a long time. I had some had breaks. I don't see how it could happen. But I know God already has the completion date. So I won't give up on my dreams. I'm not going through life with no goals, no enthusiasm, no passion. No, I'm getting my vision back. I'm greeting every morning with great expectations. It may be Friday, but this I know: Sunday is coming."

The last thing Jesus said on the cross was, "It is finished." It certainly looked like the end. It looked like it was over. But I believe that wasn't just a statement of fact. It was a statement of faith. He was saying to His Father, "I've done my part. I've fulfilled my destiny. Now I've got total trust and confidence in You. I know that You will finish what You started."

What looks like the end is only the beginning.

When your path seems darkest and you feel lost and defeated, dare to make a declaration of faith just like

Jesus: "It is finished."

What you're really saying is, "God, I know You will turn this situation around. I know You will heal my body. I know You will restore my family. I know You will give me the breaks I need."

Don't complain. Speak victory over your circumstances.

If you have a contract to close and the deal is falling apart, say, "Father, thank you, it is finished. This house will sell. This agreement will go through. This new client will be mine."

If you have the burden of heavy debt, you need to announce to that debt, "It is finished." Look at that house payment. "It is finished." Look at that college loan. "It is finished." Look at those unpaid bills. "It is finished."

Maybe you're struggling in a relationship, having difficulties at home. Well, don't go around thinking, Ah, man, I'll never get out of this mess. Why do these people treat me like this?

Instead, go through the house saying, "It is finished." If your spouse asks, "What did you say?" Just say, "You are finished. I mean, it is finished."

Say it by faith.

A young American couple began doing missionary work in Mexico in the 1960s. Their dream was to help the less fortunate, to bring God's message of hope to the Mexican people. So they left behind the comforts of home to raise their three small boys in a foreign land.

One Sunday while they were here in the States visiting family, the missionary family came to a service at Lakewood Church. My father's church was very small back then, just a couple of hundred people. The missionaries met my parents before the service and talked for a moment. Then, during that service my dad told a little of their story. At the end he received an offering for this young couple.

His Lakewood congregation gave this couple a check for \$600. They were so excited, so appreciative. They went back to Mexico and used that money to start a Bible school. Tragically, the husband was killed two years later when his small plane crashed while he was taking Bibles to rural areas of Mexico.

As you can imagine, it was a dark day for his wife and their children. It was definitely a dark Friday in their lives. It looked as though her dreams had died. She was a twenty four year old widow raising three boys under the age of four. This young woman could have easily come back to the States and given up on the dream of helping poor Mexican people. No one would have blamed her.

But she didn't do that. She understood this principle: She knew that God always finishes what He starts. She knew that even though it was a dark Friday, a better Sunday was coming—just as it does on Easter week each year in church.

So she stayed there and continued on with the Mexican Bible school. And something interesting happened. Over time, she noticed that one of her sons had an incredible gift for music. He could sing, play the piano. He had a

natural gift of communication.

That boy, Marcos Witt, grew up to be the Spanish pastor at Lakewood. He has done great things, touching many lives here and across Latin America. He fills huge stadiums for his concerts. He's won multiple Grammy Awards.

What happened? Sunday came. God completed what He started. Philippians 1:6 tells us to be confident of this: He that began a good work in you will bring it to completion.

Notice we're supposed to be confident. Talk like it's a sure thing. Act like it is a done deal. Plan like it's already happened.

Not any of this "My son will never straighten up. The more I pray, the worse he gets."

No, be confident. "Yes, he's making poor choices right now, but I know he will turn around. I know it's just a matter of time before he is back on the right track." That's confidence. That's your faith speaking.

Don't say, "I thought I would get married. I thought I'd meet someone, but it's been so long. I don't know. Maybe I'm just supposed to be single."

You've got to be confident that God will finish what He started. Instead of speaking defeat, you need to be saying, "I know God will bring somebody great into my life. I can't wait to meet up."

Another translation of Philippians 1:6 says: "God will bring you to a flourishing finish." So God will finish what He started, and he will turn out bigger and better than

you ever imagined.

Marcos's mother, Nola, had a dream to touch her community. But now because Sunday came, through her son, she's touching the whole world. God didn't just complete the promise, He brought Nola out to a flourishing finish.

Your Sunday is coming.

You may be discouraged by the sour economy, but days of darkness lead to light. It's true in matters of faith and in all aspects of our lives, even business. One of my favorite examples of this came from a young business student at Yale many years ago. This student thought he'd come up with a great idea for a business. He submitted his business plan to his management professor, who responded: "The concept is interesting and well-formed, but in order to earn better than a C, the idea must be feasible."

The Yale professor thought the student was a hopeless dreamer. Maybe that professor had lost his ability to see beyond darkness into light. If it was a reality check, I'm afraid it bounced.

That student, Fred Smith, went ahead and started his company. The last I heard, his delivery service, FedEx, was a very feasible business—with more than \$6 billion a year in revenues.

These past days, months, and even years may have had a Friday feel for you, but reject the darkness and negative voices just as Fred Smith rejected that professor's critique of his business plan. Stay hopeful. Your Sunday is coming.

God is a faithful God.

God will complete the promise He put in your heart; that you will be debt free, that your family's future will be restored, that you will enjoy a supernatural year. He has every intention of bringing your promise to pass. He's called the Author and the Finisher of our faith. God would never start something that He could not finish.

We all have dreams stored in our hearts, dreams that have yet to come to pass. In a global economic recession, the dreams delayed could fill the Grand Canyon. You are not alone in your fear and frustration, and you will not be alone when Sunday comes.

Your dream may be to sell or buy a home, to find a better job, to start a business, or to do works of charity that benefit others. Whatever your dream, the good news is God already has a completion date.

The prophet Elisha was promised a double portion of Elijah's anointing. In the Scripture, there are seven major miracles attributed to Elijah. That meant Elisha should have experienced fourteen miracles.

Yet Elisha found himself on his deathbed after experiencing only thirteen miracles. He was one short of the promised allotment! With that in mind, Elisha probably hoped that reports of his impending death were exaggerated. After all, He knew that God is a God of completion.

Still, God works according to His own plan. With just thirteen miracles on his record, Elisha died! His surprised

family then placed him in an open grave. I wonder if they chiseled on his tombstone: "One miracle short."

Elisha's body was still in the open grave when along came a group of people carrying a man killed in battle. They were in a hurry, so they decided to put his body in with Elisha's. They lowered him in, and when his body touched Elisha's, it came back to life. He stood up and walked out of that grave!

I can imagine his friends took off running when they saw that. Still, there was miracle number fourteen! God came through when it counted the most. And that tells me that as long as we stay in faith, as long as we keep believing, every promise God's put in our hearts will come to pass. Not even death can keep God from bringing it to completion.

This brings a whole new meaning to the phrase "hang in there!" There are many similar accounts in the Bible. I made an earlier mention in this book of Zerubbabel from the Old Testament. God had put in him a desire to rebuild the temple on Mount Moriah in a city that had been destroyed. Zerubbabel built the foundation of that temple, but people who lived nearby stopped him from doing any more work.

For ten years there was no progress on the temple. I'm sure Zerubbabel must have thought, God, I started out so well. I laid the foundation. I had these big dreams. But people came against me and I could not finish the job. You can imagine how discouraged he must have been, but then, after ten years had passed, a prophet by the name of Zechariah came by. He said, "Zerubbabel, God sent me all this way to give you two words: Start again."

With those words, Zerubbabel's faith was stirred. I can imagine him thinking, You mean God can still bring this to pass? Don't you know it has been ten years? Do you know how many people are against me? Do you really think I can do this?

Zechariah said, "I don't think you can do it. I know you can do it."

I believe God says the same thing to you. "Start again. Get your dreams back. Get your hopes up."

You may have wanted to buy a new house, but you didn't qualify. Try again.

Maybe at one time you believed you could overcome an addiction, but it's been so long that you've accepted where you are. God says, "Try again."

Maybe you had a dream to do something great, but you had disappointments. Your family didn't get behind you. Nobody encouraged you, and now you think it could never happen. God says, "Start again."

After a decade, Zerubbabel started again. Zechariah then instructed him to bring out the capstone, which is the final piece of stone set aside to mark completion of the temple. It was important to keep the capstone on display as the work continued, because every time he looked at it, Zerubbabel was reminded that God is a God of completion.

When Zerubbabel was tired, when he was down, when In-thought it was impossible, he'd go back over and look at

the cap stone and be reminded of God's promise to complete His plan.

Do you keep your capstone in front of you? Do you have something that represents the final piece of your dreams, something that reminds you of its being completed? You should have something, even if it's symbolic.

I've seen this symbolic gesture reap very real rewards. Two friends of mine were estranged from their son. He'd been off course for years and years. They bought a Bible and had his name engraved on it. They put that Bible on their coffee table. It was their capstone.

Every time they walked by it, they thought, It's just a matter of time before he returns to us. God will finish what He started. Their son finally came around, and their relationship was rekindled.

A pastor friend also put the capstone principle to work. He wanted to build a new sanctuary. Before his architect even drew the plans, the pastor went to a building supply store and bought one brick, the kind they'd selected for his building. He put that single brick on his desk to remind himself that God would supply his needs and complete his dream.

You can do the same thing. If you have a dream to own a new house, find a brick or a key to represent the finished product. If you have a dream to marry someone, buy a picture frame and say, "This is for my wedding photo."

Select a symbol and keep it close as a reminder that God completes what He starts. If you've been discouraged, get a new vision for your dream. Don't just see it the way it is.

Get out the capstone. See it completed. See it fulfilled.
Speak favor over it.

When you're tempted to get discouraged, just turn it around. Say, "father, I want to thank you that You will finish what You started in my life. I know You are a God of completion."

Remember, it's not by our own might or by our own power that our lives are completed. We reach fulfillment when God breathes His favor into our dreams. Hold fast to what God put in your heart. Stay determined to go out each day in faith and expectancy.

God will complete your in-completions.

Dawn grew up in my father's church. We've known each other since we were children. After marrying, Dawn and her husband were eager to still their own family. When that blessing did not come naturally, they went through a series of fertility treatments with no success. Victoria and I prayed for them and followed their efforts closely because Dawn was leading our Children's Ministry.

By the time I took over as pastor, Dawn had been trying to have a baby for more than twenty years. One day my sister Lisa, Dawn, and I were meeting about the Children's Ministry, and Dawn said, "I've got a good assistant trained because when I go to have my baby, I'll be out for a little while."

After the meeting I asked Lisa if Dawn was pregnant.
"Did I miss that great news somehow?"

Lisa laughed and said, "No. She's just still confident that

she will have a baby."

Being the great man of faith that I am (you may laugh here), the thought hit me that maybe after all these years, God had another plan for Dawn, that maybe she should look into adopting a child instead.

Still, it was clear that Dawn had a made-up mind. The promise was in her. She was confident that it would happen. I gave her credit for that confidence and faith. But I didn't give her enough credit. It turned out she deserved twice as much.

Twenty-nine years after she married and tried to start her family. Dawn became pregnant—with twins! That's why you should not let other people talk you out of your dreams. Not even me. God didn't put His promise to you in others. He put that promise in you. Only you really know what God put in your heart.

Dawn's belief in that was amazing. She thanked God every day that one day His promise for her would come to pass. And God brought her to a flourishing finish with Eric Michael and Michaella Dawn.

I love the fact that God does not give up on our dreams. Like Dawn, you too may be confident and committed to your dream. But now, because it's been a long time and you don't see anything changing, you may be tempted to think that it will never happen.

It will happen, if you get back in agreement with God. Start thanking Him that He is bringing those promises to pass. Even when it looks like a dream has died, know this: God can resurrect dead dreams. Just as He raised Christ

from the dead, God can breathe new life into your finances, your relationships, your health, and your career.

Instead of being discouraged, go through the day saying, "Father, thank you that You finish what You started in my life."

You miss God's best when you give up on your promises too soon.

You must learn to trust God's timing. Often, He doesn't act as quickly as you might like. Consider that period to be a time of testing. Are you discouraged? Are you complaining? Are you making decisions that will hinder the promise?

You may have the promise in your heart. You know you've got a great future filled with hope, faith, blessings, and promotion. Yet you are impatient. You're tempted to be discouraged. You feel frustrated, maybe even tempted to make bad decisions. But God sent me to remind you of who you are and what you have on the inside. You are a child of the Most High God. You have seeds of greatness inside you.

You have royal blood flowing through your veins. You have been crowned with glory and honor. You are destined to leave your mark on this generation. It may not have happened yet, but the promise is still in you. Don't be careless toward your future. Don't make decisions that you will regret. It's easy in the heat of the moment to blow somebody off. It's easy to walk out of a marriage. It's easy on the Fridays of your life, in dark times, to think that things will never turn around.

God sent me to assure you that better days lie ahead. You will see your dreams come to pass. It may be Friday, but your Sunday is coming. When it's time for God to promote you, to vindicate you, to restore you, all the forces of darkness cannot stop good things from happening.

God is looking for people who have a made-up mind; people who will trust His timing. It usually does not happen overnight, but it will happen. Abraham waited twenty years. He saw that promise come to pass. He had his son. Moses waited forty years. He came into his promise. He helped deliver God's people.

God knows when the time is right.

You may feel frustrated now, but God is working behind the scenes in your life. He is arranging the right people, the right breaks, and the right opportunities. Sometimes the process takes longer because not all the pieces are in place. The Scripture says that at the appointed time the promise will come to pass and it will not be one second late.

When is the appointed time? God knows when the time is right for you. When you understand this principle, it takes all the pressure off. It's a very freeing way to live, knowing that as long as we stay in faith, God will release His favor, His increase, His restoration, His healing at exactly the right time in our lives.

You should not be frustrated because your dream does not become reality as soon as you would like. You should not be worried when you don't see the changes you want. Be confident that God will finish what He started. You may not see it happening, but it is on its way—God's way.

Your dream may be realized today, next week, next year, in five years or twenty-five years. That's okay. Stay in faith. Know that God will bring the promise to pass and He will bring it to a flourishing finish.

In God's good time.

From the time he was a boy, my brother Paul had a desire to serve on medical missions in Africa. He'd journeyed to Africa at the age of twelve on a mission with my father, and that trip made a lasting impression on him. He returned to Africa as a college student to work with underprivileged people. He vowed that he would return to be of more help once he obtained his medical degree.

His dream was delayed, but on God's good time. For seventeen years, Paul was a surgeon in Arkansas, working his way up to chief of surgery at a hospital. Yet even with all of that success, he and my sister-in-law Jennifer had this powerful desire to serve as medical missionaries.

At one time or another, they applied to various mission group! But none of those efforts bore fruit. Usually the timing wasn't right, some other responsibility came up. So their dream was delayed.

Then, last year a group of doctors from our ministry planned a trip to Africa. They invited Paul to go. He had moved back to Houston in 1999 to help us pastor our father's church. If Paul hadn't made that move, he might not have been in position to go to Africa.

He joined the doctors on the mission to Africa, where he performed surgery in a small clinic. Paul found the missionary work so rewarding that he came back home,

rounded up his family, and took them to Africa for three months more. Near the end of that mission, Paul stood outdoors one night, looked up at the beautiful African sky, and was overwhelmed with gratitude. Finally he was living his dream. He was doing exactly what God put in his heart as a little boy. God brought that promise to pass.

You can trust God with your dreams.

If you feel your dream has been delayed, know that God has a plan. Be patient. My brother first felt the call to Africa at the age of twelve. That desire was only heightened by another visit ten years later. Yet it was more than twenty years before he truly lived the dream.

You may never have shared your dream with anyone, yet God knows. He put those desires in your heart. You do your part. He will do His. You should do your best every day. Pursue excellence. Live with integrity. Treat others with respect and kindness. Every day that you live as a good Christian brings you closer to the fulfillment of God's promise.

Patience is critical. Psalm 106 warns that the people of Israel did not wait for God's plan to unfold. They missed their promise because they became discouraged. They complained and gave up hope. Don't let that happen to you. Stay in faith. Recognize that God may be testing you. If you let His plan unfold, you'll find that God will give you something better than you dreamed.

On the dark Fridays of your life, when things aren't going your way, remind yourself that the light of Sunday is coming. Your own resurrection is on us way. He confident of that.

The promise God placed in your heart is alive and well. Live with that expectancy. Believe and declare that you will see your dreams and promises come to pass, and they will be better than you expected. God will bring you to a flourishing finish; it's time for restoration.

PART FOUR

IT'S TIME TO TRUST

CHAPTER 16

All Things Work Together For Our Good

A church member stopped me the other day and told me he'd lost his job of many years. He didn't understand why this had happened to him. "I gave that company my best. I was loyal. I was always there on time. It was just not right," he said.

I told him that although life is not always fair, God is fair. The Scripture says in Romans 8:28 that God causes all things to work together for our good. The key word is together. You cannot isolate one part of your life and think, This is not good. It's not good that I got laid off. It's not good that my loved one got sick. It is not good that my relationship did not work out.

That in itself is not good. But God can see the big picture. That disappointment is not the end. Your life doesn't stop because you got a bad break. That is simply one part of the puzzle. There will be another piece that connects it all. It will work together for your good.

My children and I loved to make chocolate chip cookies when they were younger. We baked together so often we didn't need the recipe. We knew exactly what to do. Each of us had a role: Jonathan was in charge of the brown sugar and the eggs. Alexandra was our flour, baking soda, and vanilla person. And I was the bowl and mixer man.

We were very precise cookie makers. We always put in exactly the same amount in the same order. We used two bowls because at one point, we mixed the contents of the

smaller bowl into the larger bowl. We beat in one egg at a time. We'd learned that to make the best-tasting cookies, we had to follow our special family recipe down to the last chocolate chip.

Once, we forgot to put in the baking soda. I thought it was no big deal since we used only a teaspoon of it. "How could that matter in such a large bowl?" But those cookies came out of the oven flat as could be. They weren't chocolate chips. They were chocolate chunks. They didn't rise one bit. They were thick as wood chips. Nobody would eat them.

What was the problem with this batch of cookies? We left out a key ingredient. Though just a spoonful was missing, it made a huge difference.

Some people are bitter about life because they haven't waited for all of the ingredients to come together. God has promised a great plan for you. He has predestined you to live in victory.

When bad things happen, you might not understand the purpose. You may not understand why you lost your job, why you became ill, why your relationship hit the rocks. Don't get stuck there. God has more ingredients coming your way.

It's time to trust.

You may feel your life is flat today: flat finances, flat career, flat marriage. But all God has to do is add His own heavenly baking soda and your life will rise to a new level.

You may have seen chef Emeril Lagasse on television. When he adds a spicy ingredient he always says, "Bam!"

Just imagine God putting a little more favor in your life—Bam! A healing—Bam! A good break—Bam!

Maybe you are lonely. All God has to do is mix in the missing ingredient—a divine connection. Bam!

Maybe you're at odds with a child. God adds a pinch of supernatural restoration. Bam!

I don't know about you, but I'm expecting some Bams! in my life. I'm expecting God to come up with the right ingredients: the right people, the right opportunities, the right breaks at just the right time.

You may have had some disappointments. Life may not have treated you fairly. But you would not be alive if God was not planning another victory in your future. That setback was not the end. That breakup you went through years ago may not have made sense, but there is another ingredient coming. God will pull it all together.

Don't be impatient. It's not over until God says it's over.

We all experience challenges that don't make sense. Viewed in isolation, we don't understand them; they make no sense. But if you keep pressing forward, one day you will look back and see how each setback played into God's master plan for your life.

When we isolate negative experiences, we tend to wonder why they've happened to us. They can seem unfair and

cruel, and this makes us bitter. I know people right now who are mad at God. They have no joy, no enthusiasm, because they went through a disappointment.

Instead of believing God was still in control and waiting for a new beginning, they isolated that incident. They thought, Why did God let this happen to me? But not everything makes sense on its own. You need to trust in God's plan. Have the attitude: "I know God has a great plan for my life. I know He is directing my steps. Even though I may not understand this, I know it's not a surprise to God. And somehow, someway, He will work it out to my advantage."

The key to good-tasting cookies is how the ingredients work together. It's got to be just the right mix, put in the oven at just the right time.

One aspect of your life may be bad, but all your ingredients are not in. Remember, a little baking soda can make a huge difference. Just a little break, just one person, just one idea, just one touch of God's favor can turn the bitter into the sweet, the sorrow into joy, the mourning into dancing.

Stay open to God's plan unfolding.

Scott was given up for adoption at six weeks of age. When he turned two, he developed a mysterious illness that stunted his growth. At first, doctors thought his illness might be cystic fibrosis, but they ruled that out. For six years Scott was in and out of the hospital. Doctors could not figure out what was hindering his growth.

Eventually, he got a little better and started growing, but

he was still very small. His dream in school was to play sports—baseball, basketball, football—but he was too small. To make matters worse, some of the kids bullied him, made fun of him, and called him names. It didn't look like God had a plan. Scott's life didn't seem to make sense. But remember, it's not over until God says it's over. All Scott needed was a few more ingredients.

He'd been given up by his parents, and that sort of rejection is hard enough to deal with. He spent years in and out of the hospital, and that too would be very discouraging. But setbacks and hard times are not permanent. Life goes on. As long as you are here, there is always more to the mix.

Sooner or later, God adds His special ingredients. He blends in a spoonful of His favor, a cup of His goodness, and then sprinkles in a few of His supernatural breaks. Then all of a sudden, a bitter life turns sweet.

Scott never did become a star in basketball, baseball, or football. He didn't have the physical size for those sports. Still, he had his own special gifts, and when he found the right mix, he became a great athlete.

Scott knew God didn't make mistakes. When he realized he would always be too small for other sports, he laced on his ice skates and went to lessons with his sister. It wasn't long before the coach noticed Scott was an extremely gifted skater. In fact, he was Olympic caliber! Still, some experts told him he was too small even for that sport.

"You don't have a chance. You're just wasting your time."

But Scott already had learned how to deal with adversity.

He'd grown up faced with challenges. Adversity was nothing new to him. His early challenges had prepared him for later victories.

You are not who others say you are. You are who God says you are. God said Scott Hamilton was a victor. This small man with a big heart won every national and international skating championship for four straight years, including the 1984 Olympic gold medal. In the natural, you may not see how you can accomplish your goals. You cannot understand what God has put in your heart. But know that all of your ingredients are not in the mix yet.

When we're making cookies at the Osteen house, our favorite moment comes when it is time to sprinkle in the chocolate chips. The chips give the cookies their great flavor. They are the tastiest ingredient.

Your life may not seem exciting, or maybe you are not seeing much growth. That's because your chocolate chips haven't been mixed in yet. Don't be discouraged. You don't know what God has in mind for you.

Quit dwelling on disappointments. Don't fret over why your life hit hard times. Shake that off. Adopt this attitude: "The flour is in the mix. The chocolate chips are coming soon. Just a few more ingredients and God will sweeten my life!"

When Moses was leading the people of Israel through the wilderness, they went day after day without water. They were so thirsty they didn't know if they could make it. They finally came to a river. They were so excited. Their dream had come true. They rushed to drink from the

river, but when they tasted the water, it was bitter. They couldn't drink a drop.

Have you ever arrived somewhere, like the people of Israel, with great expectations, only to meet with disappointment? We all have had our dreams cast on the rocks of bitterness from time to time.

In 1981, we were looking forward to a big Christmas holiday with family and friends. Then, on December 11, we learned that my mother had terminal cancer. Doctors said she had just a few weeks to live. Like the people Moses was leading, we thought we would be enjoying a family holiday, but instead we were handed sad news. Moses' people complained to him of their thirst. The water was bitter and their lives became bitter. God told Moses to put a tree limb in the water, and when he did, those bitter waters were turned sweet. Then the people could drink freely to quench their thirst.

What is the message in this story? When life turns out bitter, when things seem unfair, God is not at a loss. He has another ingredient to turn your bitter waters into sweet.

You may not understand why you are going through difficult times. But don't try to figure it out. Faith is all about trusting God when you don't understand.

As you may know, my family's bitterness over my mother's illness also turned to relief and gratitude. She defied all medical expectations and beat the cancer. Her story of faith and healing has inspired many others who have done the same. God's plan has unfolded.

Some people who've experienced hardship get caught up on why God didn't answer their prayers. They grow bitter that God did not heal them or their loved ones. They grow bitter because He did not restore a marriage or find them a new job right away.

I've learned to never put a question mark where God has put a period. When something is over and done, let it go and move on to the next chapter in your life. You may get a taste of bitterness, but know that God has a vast pantry. He has more ingredients to add. Something in your future will turn the bitter into the sweet.

I know a gentleman who worked for many years in the newspaper business. He was nearing retirement, but changes in the industry led to downsizing and layoffs. He was one of many thousands of journalists who lost their jobs. Those waters were bitter. Yet he understood this principle I've shared with you. He didn't give up on life. He didn't go around complaining. He stayed in faith, believing that God would open up another door.

Now, this gentleman had always had a sideline writing books. He'd written nearly thirty of them while working for newspapers. It was hard working those long hours and then writing before and after his day job, but he felt it was a calling, and it helped pay the bills.

And then, within days of losing his newspaper job, he got an offer to work on the biggest book of his writing career. If he'd still been working for a newspaper, he could not have signed that book deal, which led to even more opportunities and rewards far beyond those of his newspaper job. God always has another ingredient. If you reject bitterness and despair by staying in faith, He will

cook up something far better than you imagined.

Sometimes, God pushes us out of our comfort zone and into a growing zone. He sees that we are afraid to take a step, so He gives us a good strong push. Nobody likes to be pushed, especially when we are thrown into unfamiliar or uncomfortable territory. Yet you need to understand that what is unfamiliar and uncomfortable may also be exciting and beneficial.

Keep in mind that bitter waters may be a blessing in disguise.

Losing your job may seem like a hardship at first. But what if being laid off forces you to stretch and grow into a bigger and better job? What if it forces you to go back to earn a higher degree or to finally step up and do what you've always dreamed of doing?

In the same way, a bad report from your doctor may shake you up at first, but it also might lead you to a healthier lifestyle. No one likes to hear that he has high blood pressure, but an early diagnosis can give you time to change your diet, to exercise, or to take medication that will lengthen your life.

Even the worst imaginable bitter news—the death of a loved one—can force positive change. My father's death forced me to step forward as a pastor, into my divine destiny. I've seen many others who've taken the overwhelming power of grief and turned their pain into a force for good.

Nancy Brinker was just three years older than her lively little sister Suzy. Nancy was more serious, more career-

oriented, but they were always close. Even as adults living in different cities, they talked every day on the telephone. One day, Suzy told Nancy that she'd been diagnosed with breast cancer. Nancy immediately flew to be with her. She went with Suzy for treatments in Houston and other cities. She stayed by her side through nine operations in six months.

After fighting together for three years, Nancy lost Suzy. It was a bitter blow. Yet Nancy was determined that her sister's death would make the world a better place. No doubt, you have seen the results of Nancy's determined efforts. She created the Susan G. Komen Foundation, which has raised more than \$1 billion for cancer research through its Race for the Cure events. It is the world's largest grassroots network for breast cancer survivors and activists. Much good has come from Nancy's grief for her beloved little sister.

The symbol for the word crisis in Chinese is made up of two words: danger and opportunity. In every crisis, in every loss, in every disappointment there is the danger of growing bitter, staying bitter, settling for less. Yet there is also always the opportunity to turn darkness into light just as Nancy Brinker did.

We can grow. We can step out in faith. We can stretch ourselves to experience the new things that God has in store. You may not have the time and resources to launch a national organization like Nancy Brinker did, but you can make a difference in your own neighborhood, community, or congregation.

I was reminded of this while speaking with Wes and Val Herndon from our church. They are fine and faithful

people who lost their teenage daughter Katy to cancer. We prayed and believed with them for many, many years as she battled the disease. Katy held on to life as long as she possibly could, but then she went home to the Lord.

As you can imagine, her grieving parents tasted some bitter waters. They didn't know why their daughter had to die. Even though it was difficult, they committed her passing into God's hands. Today, the Herndons serve as shining examples of how God can turn your life around. They radiate God's goodness. Whenever I meet someone grieving the loss of a child, I think of this couple. I often put them in touch with others going through grief.

They went through a major crisis. I can't think of anything bigger. They faced the darkness. They could easily be negative, bitter, angry people, blaming God, asking, "Why did this happen?"

But in their crisis they saw the opportunity. They saw a chance to receive God's grace. Today the Herndons are helping others to make it through.

God wants to show His grace through you.

When you go through a crisis, instead of becoming bitter, believe that God is still in control. Stay hopeful and believe that He will open new opportunities, and then you too will become an example of God's amazing grace. You not only will see God's goodness in a greater way, but you will inspire others to keep moving forward into the good things God has in store.

I love the way Job put it: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him." Job had this unwavering trust because he

knew God was still on the throne. When we go through things that don't make sense, things that we don't understand, we should call to mind Job and his faith.

"I'm not worried about it. I know God is still in complete control of my life. I know He has me in the palm of His hand. This may look like the end, but I know God has a new beginning. Weeping may endure for a night, but I know a secret: joy is coming in the morning!"

The Scripture says all of our days have been written in God's book. He's already recorded every part of your life from beginning to end. God knows every disappointment, every loss, and every challenge. The good news is that your story ends in victory. Your final chapter concludes with your fulfilling your God-given destiny.

Here's the key: When you go through a disappointment, when you go through a loss, don't stop on that page. Keep moving forward. There's another chapter in front of you.

Sometimes we miss opportunities because we are so focused on what didn't work out. Whether it's a marriage that failed or a job you lost, you must leave it and move forward. You've been on that page long enough. You've reread the story 450 times. Let it go and move on to the next chapter God has written.

You may not understand everything you went through. But if you'll just keep pressing forward, not letting the bitterness take root, you will come to a chapter in your future that will pull it all together, a chapter that will make sense of it all.

Many of those who suffered hardship because of

Hurricane Katrina came to Houston to recover from that terrible storm. Most of those I've met lost everything. Their lives were changed forever.

Whenever I've talked with Katrina survivors, I've tried to comfort them and give them hope. I've told them that there is nothing they can do about what happened to them, but that they can make a decision about how they will respond.

"You can fight it. You can resist, get bitter, and live with a chip on your shoulder. Or you can accept the hand you've been dealt, seeing this as an opportunity to meet new friends, to live in a new city, to have a new job. The choice is up to you."

Another couple I know told me recently that they'd become estranged from their son. They had had a good relationship with him. In fact, they'd worked together. But somehow they got cross-ways, and this son refused to speak to them. He moved to another city. They did not even have a phone number for him. They don't know how to get in touch with him. You can imagine their concern. They were discouraged. I told them that there was more to be written.

Somewhere in their future—and in yours, too—there is a restoration chapter. It may be a month, a year, or ten years from now, so don't get stuck on that page. Keep praying. Keep believing. Envision it. Let the seeds take root.

To reach up for the new, you must let go of the old.

What is behind you is not nearly as important as what lies

in front of you. Everything you've been through was preparation for where you are right now. Disappointments, challenges, and failures were not meant to destroy you. They were meant to strengthen you, to build your character, to give you the fortitude to accomplish your God-given destiny.

Unfair things happen. You may not understand why hard times hit you. But you have come too far to let setbacks stop you from stepping forward. Refuse to get stuck in the past. God has a plan with your name on it, a plan full of blessing, full of favor, full of victory.

God will put it all together for you.

Sometimes life is like a mystery novel or a movie thriller. Things happen and we don't understand what they mean because the whole story has not been revealed. Once the final clues are given, the dots are connected, and suddenly the plot makes sense. But the story is complete only when all the pieces fall into place.

At times, we don't have all the pieces of the story God has written for us. We don't understand how certain events in our lives will play out. We ask, Why did this happen? Why didn't my relationship work out? Why did I lose my job?

With a mystery novel or a movie thriller, you don't get frustrated. You know that eventually everything will make sense to you. You need to approach life with the same faith. Sometimes things in our lives don't make sense to us. But God's plan will be revealed to us as His plot plays out.

Something may seem unfair right now. You may say, "Joel,

if God is so good, why did my life turn out like this?" Or "Why did I go through that divorce?" "Why didn't I get that promotion?" "It just doesn't seem to make sense."

That frustration is due to the fact that God's plan for you is still unfolding. If you stay in faith, before long you will see how every setback, every disappointment, even a terrible loss was simply another part of your story. God sees the big picture. Your life doesn't stop because of one setback or even many setbacks. Each part of your life helps advance your story. Connected and completed, they make up the whole of your life. They will come together for your fulfillment.

Often the biggest challenges offer the greatest and most surprising rewards.

I read about a young woman whose father underwent a heart transplant. Though at first he seemed to be doing well, several months later he died. She was in another city, working on her master's degree, when she learned of his passing. She packed and went to the airport to catch the first flight to her father's town.

She was so upset, so heartbroken. While waiting for her flight, her grief overcame her. She wept uncontrollably. She did not see the man come up, but she felt these loving arms around her and then she heard a voice saying, "Ma'am, what's wrong?"

She recognized the voice. She looked up and it was Kevin Costner, the actor and director. Struck by her sadness, he had stopped to offer this stranger his help. She explained that her father had passed away. The actor comforted her, staying with her so long he missed his own flight.

As he walked her to her boarding gate, Costner mentioned that he would be returning to her city to film a movie. He asked her to stop by and let him know how she was doing. Several months later, she was driving in heavy traffic near her home. She realized the backup was caused by a movie crew working in a nearby park. She wondered if it was Kevin Costner's movie, but then she thought she should not interrupt even if it was.

Later in the day she drove by the same spot. This time something compelled her to stop. She learned that it was Costner's movie. She told a security guard that he had invited her to stop by. He took her to meet Costner. The Academy Award winner was just as kind and warm to her as he had been at the airport. He invited her to watch the scene being filmed.

After a few minutes, an executive in charge of the production came and sat next to the young lady, just being friendly. He explained the scene being filmed and the role of each crew member. She found it easy to talk with him. Soon, they were bantering like old friends.

That night, the lady called her mother and said, "Today I met the man of my dreams. I'm going to marry him."

Sure enough, they began dating, fell in love, and one year later, they were married. Who would have thought that crying in an airport would turn out to be a significant piece of her puzzle? God used that moment like a connecting piece, to connect her with her future husband.

That is an amazing story, I know. But we have an amazing Father in Heaven. God has the pieces to the puzzle of your life. Because it is incomplete, that puzzle may not make

sense right now. Don't get discouraged. There is another piece coming. This one will complete you.

God has some more in store for you. He will turn your mourning into dancing. He will lift you out of mediocrity into a life of fulfillment.

Keep dreaming. Stay in faith. Play it out in your mind.

Bam! A divine connection.

Bam! A breakthrough.

Bam! A supernatural opportunity.

Bam! A wall comes down.

Prepare for some Bams! in your life. You have not seen your best days.

Learn to shake off bitterness. Do not dwell on unanswered questions. Believe that God is in complete control. He will show up and show out in unusual ways. He will transform your scars into stars. He will make your mess into your message.

And when you come to the end of your life, you will be blessed to say, "I've finished the puzzle. I fulfilled my destiny. God put together all of the pieces and made me whole!"

CHAPTER 17

God Remembers You

Lakewood's singers were leading worship during a church service several years ago when I looked out over the congregation. Then something hit me. I didn't see my niece Savannah. My sister April's seven-year-old was staying at our house that weekend.

I leaned over to Victoria and asked, "Where is Savannah sitting?"

"I don't know," Victoria said. "Where did you put her?"
"I didn't put her anywhere," I said. "I didn't bring her. You brought her."

Victoria's eyes grew even bigger than usual.

"No, Joel. I thought you brought her."

My heart sank.

Victoria and I usually drive separately to church on Sunday because I need to get there earlier. I thought she was bringing Savannah. Apparently, she thought I'd brought her.

We'd left my little niece at home all by herself!

Crazy thoughts raced through my mind. I had just watched the movie *Home Alone*. I envisioned Savannah wandering through the house hollering and screaming. She could be scarred for life! I thought.

I was up on the platform in the middle of a service with thousands of people. I was trying to look spiritual, trying to appear holy. But on the inside I was in a total panic.

Headlines flashed before my eyes: "Pastor Arrested for Leaving Child At Home!"

We were thirty minutes from home. Victoria and I debated whether to call the police or a neighbor. Finally, we decided to call my brother-in-law, Kevin, who lives just a few minutes from us. As soon as we told him, he ran to our house. He found little Savannah sitting at the back door just as peaceful as can be.

With a sweet smile on her face, she was not the least bit worried, not the least upset. The first thing she said to Kevin was, "I knew you would remember me."

Later, I asked if she wasn't just a little scared.

"No, Uncle Jo-Jo," she replied sweetly. "I knew you would come back for me."

If only we could all have that same childlike faith when we feel forgotten and alone, when things aren't going our way. If, instead of getting negative, bitter, or into self-pity, we could just shake off those negative feelings and say, like little Savannah did, "I'm not worried. I know God remembers me. I know it's just a matter of time before He shows up and turns it around."

I don't think it's an accident that the phrase "God remembered" is found seventy-three times in the Scripture. He wants us to know He's there for us. "God

remembered." means more than God has not forgotten you. It's more significant than that. When we're told God remembers you, it means He will overwhelm us with His favor. He will surprise us with His goodness.

It's time to trust.

When God remembers you, He will do more than just think about you. He will show up and show out like you've never seen before.

That's what happened to a young lady named Rachel in the Bible. She wanted to have a child so badly. She tried and tried but just couldn't conceive. Her womb was barren. Back in those days a woman was really looked down on if she couldn't give her husband a child. Being childless brought shame to her and her husband.

Year after year passed, and Rachel felt so alone, so empty, like she was less than she was supposed to be. To make matters worst, her sister Leah kept having baby after baby. It was like rubbing salt in the wound. But one day something happened that turned everything around. The Scripture says that "God remembered Rachel."

Isn't that phrase interesting? It doesn't say Rachel remembered God. And of course it's good when we reach out to God, when we remember Him. But it's even more significant when God remembers you.

God is so merciful. When we feel we have no more strength to believe, when we've prayed so much we can't pray any longer, when we've gotten so discouraged we just give up on the promise and think it's not meant to be, that's exactly where Rachel was. But notice what

happened. God remembered her and answered her plea and gave her a child.

My friend, when God remembers you, it doesn't matter how long it's been that way. It doesn't matter how impossible it looks.

God will turn it around.

You may feel like Rachel today: alone, forgotten, empty. Maybe you've given up on a dream. Maybe you have already accepted the fact that you will never have a child. You will never go back to college. You never will be successful in your finances, in your marriage. You've written off your dreams, your goals.

But understand, just because you write off your dreams doesn't mean God writes them off. God remembers you and He remembers the dream He put within you. He remembers the goals, the promises, your deepest desires. You may have said, "Just forget about it, God."

But God says, "No, no, no. I remember! I put the dream in you, and I still have a way to bring it to pass."

We all go through seasons where we're not seeing any progress, no new doors are opening, no breaks are coming our way. In those times, it is easy to feel forgotten, or at least insignificant, as though our hopes and dreams don't matter, especially when the hard times continue month after month, even year after year. We lose our enthusiasm. We get discouraged, and we drag through life thinking, Nobody is interested. This never will change.

After a church service one day, a man told me, "Joel, I've

been praying about a situation for years, but I don't see anything happening."

He felt forgotten.

Another member of our church told me she had been in an abusive relationship that left her feeling as though "I don't matter anymore."

She was so beaten down she couldn't even look at me. Have you ever felt like those hurting people? Have you ever prayed and prayed, but it seemed like God was on vacation? Have you ever had those seasons when everybody around you was being blessed, but the good breaks just passed you by? You felt overlooked. Even though you were in a relationship, or married, you still felt all alone?

Do you have a smile on the outside but feel empty on the inside? Do you feel as though nobody knows what you are going through and, worse, nobody cares?

I know it is easy to feel forgotten. But when loneliness sets in, look to God's great promise in Isaiah 49:15-16. He said, "I will not forget you. I have engraved you into the palm of My hand."

You are not forgotten. You are not abandoned. God remembers you!

You may have been sick for years, feeling like your health will never change for the better. But God knows every sick and lonely night. He sees every tear you've ever shed. He has you carved into the palm of His hand.

Maybe you have a dream in your heart, but every time you reach for it, you come up short. I'll never do this. It will never happen.

God has not forgotten about you. In fact, even right now He's working in your life, arranging the right people, the right breaks, the right opportunities. So, at just the right time, in your due sea son, you will see that dream come to fulfillment!

Maybe you're a parent. You're raising your children. You're making all kinds of sacrifices so their dreams can come to pass. But know this: God has not forgotten about your own dreams. He has not forgotten about the personal goals put on hold for your children. He sees your sacrifices. He's saying, "Not only will I help your children succeed, I will help you fulfill the desires of your own heart."

I want you to get your hopes up today. Put your shoulders back. Hold your head up high. People may forget you, but God will never forget about you. Others may do you wrong. Friends may betray you. Those you count on may leave you when you need them the most, but God is the friend who sticks closer than a brother.

When life deals you a tough blow, when you pray but the heavens are silent, when it's taking longer than you want, you need to remind yourself of this promise: "God has not forgotten about me. He has not forgotten about my hopes and dreams. He's not forgotten about the unfair things I've been through. He's not forgotten about my years of sacrificing, my years of giving, my years of serving."

It's just a matter of time before you reap your harvest

for the seeds you've sown.

Remember Nat "King" Cole's signature song "Unforgettable"? You are just as unforgettable to our God. You matter to Him. He has carved you into the palm of His hand. When God looks at you, all He can say is, "That's my masterpiece. That child makes me proud. That person brings a smile to my face. That is the one who brings joy to My spirit."

Your attitude should be, "I will not drag through life negative, defeated, feeling alone, left out, forgotten. I know God remembers me."

I met a woman who'd come to Houston for cancer treatment at the big medical center. She was from a smaller city. She was very nervous about the treatment to begin with, and then she also was intimidated about being in a large city all by herself for three months, she told me.

The first couple of weeks she felt so alone, nobody to talk to, like she had been forgotten. She said she always watched our services on television, so her dream was to come to one at our church, but she didn't have a ride and she didn't know anybody who could give her one. She had special medical needs that made it difficult to travel without help.

But one day in the hospital cafeteria line, she overheard the couple behind her talking about attending services at Lakewood each weekend. She told them she enjoyed watching the services on television.

The couple offered right away to bring her to a service.

"We'll come by and pick you up this Sunday," they said.

Their offer was a dream come true. She was thrilled. They brought her into our church, and as she walked in, all she could do was weep and weep. The greeters gave her a hug at the door. When she said she was a first-time visitor, they brought her down and sat her in the very front row. She was so excited. She told me afterward, "Joel, I sat right by your brother Paul."

I apologized.

"You're right," she said. "He's not near as good looking as you are."

Okay, she didn't say that, but I know she was thinking it. No, what she was really thinking was that God had remembered her. He had sent the right people to the right place to let her know she was not forgotten. Better yet, the Lakewood members she'd met at the hospital offered to bring her to services every Sunday as long as she was in town. She attended our services for three months.

She was not forgotten. My friend, neither are you!

In the Bible, Joseph was betrayed by his brothers. He was falsely accused by a lady and spent thirteen years in prison for something he didn't do. I'm sure he must have felt, "God has forgotten about me. Look how my life has turned out. I thought I had a dream. I thought I had a promise. I must have been wrong."

Yet the story of Joseph also teaches us that we should see hard times as a test of faith. When things aren't going our way, we have the opportunity to find out what we are

made of. What kind of attitude will we have? Will we be negative, bitter? Will we blame God? Or will we stay in faith, knowing that God has us in the palm of His hand?

Joseph used his gift for interpreting dreams to help his cellmates. He told one, the pharaoh's butler, that he would be freed in three days time. Then, Joseph asked the butler to put in a good word for him with the pharaoh when he left. Sure enough, the butler was released three days later. But wouldn't you know it? He forgot all about Joseph.

Sometimes the people who owe you the most will forget you the quickest. But don't worry. Don't get discouraged. Just because they forgot about you doesn't mean God has abandoned you.

When Joseph was finally released, he was promoted. I love what he said later to his brothers: "What was meant for my harm, God used to my advantage." When you're faced with difficulties that never seem to end, keep reminding yourself, "God has not forgotten about me."

Many hardworking people have dealt with foreclosures on their homes in recent years. I read about one woman who was laid off and couldn't make her payments. The bank foreclosed and put her home up for auction with several others. She had already accepted that it was over, that a chapter in her life was through. She was doing her best to deal with it, but down deep she was heartbroken.

A single mother, she had raised her children in that home. I'm sure she felt like Rachel; alone, forgotten, like nobody really cared. Here goes her house that meant so much to her. Just to get closure, she went to the bank's big auction of all its foreclosed homes. There, all she could do was

weep and weep seeing not just her house but her home on the auction block.

A lady noticed her weeping, came up, and asked her what was going on. She explained that she'd lost her job and now her home was about to be sold. The lady showed her the list of houses for sale and asked which home was hers. She pointed to it.

As the auction of her home progressed, the stranger bid on it. She had competition, but she kept raising her offer. Eventually, she won the bidding for the single mother's former home. Then she tracked the woman down.

"I came here to buy my son a house, but I realize now God sent me here to buy your house," she said. "I want to give it back to you."

This woman had been heartbroken. She had come to say goodbye to her home of many years, expecting to see it sold. But God had other plans. He made a way when it looked like there was no way. God remembered her.

You may have written off your dreams. You may have given up on promises God put in your heart. But God has not forgotten you. He can always turn bad times into blessed days. This woman lost her home. God sent His bidder to the auction. You may be facing foreclosure. Know that God may be making His own bid.

If you were to lose your job, God may give you a better job with better benefits, making better money. So do not feel abandoned. If someone you care for walks out of your life, know that God can walk someone more worthy right back in. Do not ever feel abandoned. God remembers you. He

remembers the dreams He's placed on the inside. He remembers the destiny He created for you. He remembers the assignment you've been given.

Critics and foes may try to push you down. You may be tempted to feel alone and forgotten. But fight those feelings. Go through your days thanking God for remembering you. "God, thank you for remembering Your promises. You're remembering my dreams. You're remembering my destiny."

Jake, a man of little faith, was hiking through the woods. He was caught in a terrible snowstorm. The storm was so blinding, Jake lost all sense of direction. It was quickly getting dark. He wasn't an experienced hiker. He didn't have the proper gear. He was just out trying to get some exercise. He knew he couldn't survive all night in the cold.

Disoriented and exhausted, he could not keep walking. He found a small crevice in a rock wall and took shelter there. To his surprise, he woke up the next morning as warm as toast. When he regained his senses, he realized that this huge shaggy dog was curled up beside him. That dog acted just like a big heater. He had no idea where the dog came from. But it saved his life.

Up to that point, Jake had little interest in matters of faith. Now he is outspoken about his beliefs. He even has a ministry. Everywhere he goes, Jake tells people that when all else was lost, God remembered him.

God knows your purpose.

He knows what you were put here to do. Even when people don't give God the time of day, even when they just

live for themselves, God has not forgotten the destiny He created for them.

Years ago, Paul, a young Korean man, was dying from tuberculosis. One of his lungs had collapsed. As he lay in his bed at home, in so much pain, just waiting to die, he began to call out to his different gods one by one. He cried out to this god, "Please help me." There was no answer. He called out to another god. The same thing. And again, and again, and again.

Finally, in desperation, Paul said, "If there is any God up there anywhere, I don't ask you to heal me. I just ask you to show me how to die."

He was afraid to die. A few hours later, a young college student walking through the neighborhood felt what she called "an unexplainable love" drawing her to Paul's house. She went to his door not knowing why or what she was doing. A lady answered.

The college girl told her: "I know this sounds very, very odd, but is there anything I can pray with you about?"

The woman who answered the door was Paul's mother. She began to cry. "Yes, my son is on his deathbed," she said.

The college student went in. She prayed over Paul. That day, he gave his life to Christ. But Paul's life was not over. God supernaturally healed him. Today, many years later, Dr. Paul Yonggi Cho is pastor of the largest church in the world. He has more than five hundred thousand people in his church in South Korea.

God does not abandon His own. He knows the calling on your life. He knows what you were put here for. You need to do everything you can in the natural, but what you cannot do, God will supernaturally arrange.

I'm sure that young Dr. Paul felt alone and forgotten in all of his pain and suffering from tuberculosis. But he did not realize there was a Creator who knew him before he was born, a God who had granted him a purpose: to touch thousands. Sickness tried to stop him, but sickness is not too big for our God.

What is it that you think God cannot do? Do you have a family member, a relative who seems too far gone? Do you have a coworker, a friend, a neighbor who seems just too sarcastic, too cynical, too much of a partier?

I assure you: God has not written them off. God remembers them. And when God remembers, supernatural things can happen, and do!

I want to breathe new life into your faith today. You, too, may be battling an illness and feel like you'll never get well. But we serve a God who is not limited to the natural. You have an assignment. You have a destiny to fulfill. And no matter how bad it looks in the natural, no matter how many obstacles are in your path, God has not forgotten about you.

He will not take away His calling on your life.

You may be living far below where you're supposed to. You may be far away from where God wants you to be. But you might as well get ready, because the Most High God will not write you off. And when God remembers

you, all the forces of darkness cannot keep you from fulfilling your purpose.

Sickness can't stop it. Your enemies can't stop it. Layoffs and foreclosures can't stop it.

God said He will lift you out of the pit, set your feet on a rock, and put a new song in your heart. "Unforgettable," anyone?

You need to get your fire back. Reclaim and fulfill your dreams. It may look like those dreams have died, but God can resurrect even dead dreams. Those promises may have been buried by disappointment, unfairness, sickness, or heartbreak, but God has not forgotten you. And when the Most High remembers, there is nothing that can keep you from your destiny.

There was a girl born into a dysfunctional home in the Midwest. She was abused and neglected, according to her report. There was no consistency in this family. She never really felt true love. In the natural, all the odds were against her. It didn't look like she would ever know love or fulfillment. Her home life was so bad, as a teen she asked the authorities to take her out of her own family's home. The judge studied her unusual request and then placed her in foster care.

This young lady felt alone, confused, and forgotten. Several months later, she agreed to be a part of a special program. She was adopted by a single mom living in a small community dedicated to helping other needy children. She began to excel in that loving environment. She became an honor student, a leader whom other children looked up to.

She thrived so much that she was invited along with the others from her community to be on a national TV talk show. On this program the host asked her what her dreams and goals were.

"My dream is to go to Harvard University so I can help others like so many people have helped me," she said. A few days later she received a call from out of state. The lady on the phone said, "I saw you on the program this week. I have a question for you. Would you accept a scholarship to Yale University instead?"

The young lady agreed. She is now a Yale graduate.

No matter who has tried to push you down, no matter how many unfair things you've been through, God has not forgotten you. He said He would be a Father to the fatherless. When people do you wrong, your Heavenly Father will defend you. When you need a break, your Heavenly Father will show you favor. When it looks like there is no way, your Heavenly Father will make a way.

Dr. William H. "Bill" Hinson was the beloved pastor of Houston's First United Methodist Church for many years and a good friend of our family. He once told me that when his children were younger, he went out to pick up the newspaper one morning and saw a baby owl lying on the ground. His kids ran to look at it. They wanted to pick up the baby bird and hold it, but he stopped them. He called the local veterinarian, a friend.

The vet told him that sometimes strong winds blow baby owls out of the nest. Or sometimes the little owl gets overconfident and tries to fly before its wings are strong

enough.

"In any case, it's good you didn't let the children pick it up," the vet said.

"Why is that?" said Dr. Hinson.

"Because if you go out and look up in the trees, there's a good chance you will see a momma owl looking down closely watching that baby owl," the vet said. "The mother will swoop down and attack if she thinks her baby is threatened, even when it is out of the nest and on the ground."

Dr. Hinson took his children back outside that day. They looked up, and, sure enough, in the top of this pine tree there sat a large momma owl with these huge eyes staring directly down at them. She was standing guard over her fallen baby, ready to swoop in and protect it.

Dr. Hinson told his children something else the vet had said.

"The momma owl would give her own life to protect her baby if she thought someone would harm it," he said.

Just like that momma owl, your Heavenly Father is looking down right now, standing guard over you.

Sometimes you may feel like the strong winds have knocked you down. At times you may feel like you're alone and forgotten. But if you can just remember to look up, you'll see those big heavenly eyes looking right back down at you. You'll see those eyes of love, those eyes of compassion, just waiting to come to the rescue, to protect,

to defend.

Have faith that no matter where you are in life, no matter what comes against you, you are not alone. You are not forgotten. God remembers you. He remembers the dreams He's put on the inside. He remembers the promises you're holding on to. He remembers the sacrifices you've made.

You are unforgettable to our God. When He remembers you, as with Rachel, supernatural things will happen. The dark clouds will give way to sunshine. The barren womb will conceive. The shaggy dog will warm you. The stranger will reach out and answer your prayers.

Who knows? One phone call may lead you to your dream. One conversation may deliver your promise. Stir up your faith. Believe that God is watching over you. Believe that nothing can keep you from your destiny. Know that you will see God show up and show out in amazing ways.

He will give you favor to accomplish your dreams. He will supernaturally heal your body. You will overcome every obstacle, defeat every enemy, and live that life of victory He has in store!

CHAPTER 18

Gaining Strength Through Adversity

The movie *The Pursuit of Happyness* is about a friend of mine. Chris Gardner is a smart, hardworking businessman who was hit by one adversity after another. His business fails. He loses his savings. His wife leaves him. He ends up homeless, raising his small son on the streets. One day the father and son are shooting baskets with a new ball he'd given the boy. As they were playing, the father says to his son: "I don't want you to stay out here and play all day long because you'll probably just be an average player. After all, that's all I was. You're usually just as good as your dad. We have the same genes. So I don't want you to waste a lot of time every day thinking that you'll ever really be good."

You could see his words taking the wind out of the boy's sails. The son puts his ball down and he walks away feeling dejected. The father sees the impact of his words and, feeling bad, he kneels, looks his son in the eye, and says, "Listen here, son, don't you ever let anyone tell you that you can't be something great—not even me."

Often, those who will try to discourage you are simply imposing their own limitations upon you.

"That's as high as I went," they're saying. "You'll never go higher."

Don't believe it. Never allow anyone to convince you that your God-given dreams are out of reach. Not a family

member, not a coach, not a so called friend.

Listen to others. Be respectful. Welcome wisdom and support. But remember, when it's all said and done, the promise is in you. It's not in them.

Even King David had to rise above rejection. He had his doubters. His father and other family members did not see greatness in him. Yet David did not let the doubters determine his destiny. He said, "They may think I'm mediocre, but I know I have seeds of greatness. I know I'm equipped, I'm anointed, I will become everything God has created me to be."

The fact is that any time God is about to take you to a new level, you will face opposition. There will be new battles to fight, new obstacles to overcome, maybe people who doubt you, or speak poorly of you. I once heard somebody say, "New level, new devil."

It's easy to let negative voices discourage you. It's tempting to think, Why is this happening? Why did they doubt me? Or Why did I get laid off? Or Why am I hit with one thing after another?

But right beyond today's challenges are tomorrow's victories. New levels of success are just on the other side. Whenever God is about to take you to a higher level, you will face stronger opposition. There will be new battles to fight, new obstacles to overcome. The adversity can actually be the tool God uses to promote you. Many times our enemies will do more to catapult us to success than our friends.

I know in my life there have been times when I was down.

I didn't see a way out. It looked impossible. But I thought, I cannot give up now. It would make my enemies too happy.

Sometimes we can smile, not because we want to, not because we feel like it, but because we will not give our enemies the pleasure of seeing us down. On the inside, you may be hurting. But on the outside, you should wear a smile on your face.

Do not let them see you defeated. Not out of pride. Not out of spite. But out of a quiet confidence, knowing that you are a child of the Most High God, and He would not have allowed it if He did not have a purpose for it.

Deep down, know that you will come through challenging times promoted, increased, better off than you were before.

It's time to trust.

David would be known only as a shepherd boy if it were not for Goliath. The future king's greatest enemy was actually a tool used by God to promote him. David was called a man after God's own heart. God certainly loved David like He does each one of us. But what did God do? He sent him Goliath. The size of your problem reflects the promise of your future. If you have a big problem, don't get discouraged. That's a sure sign you've got a big future. Whenever God pits us against a Goliath, He always gives us the strength, the determination, the fortitude to overcome.

Even when the challenge is great and the bottom falls out, in the middle of that adversity there will be a

supernatural strength, a peace that passes all understanding, a joy rising up in our spirit. God gives us exactly what we need.

I love the fact that David defeated Goliath with far less equipment than most foot soldiers took into battle. They tried to put Saul's armor on him, but it was too big. And so David went out to the battlefield. He didn't have a sword. He didn't have a shield. He didn't have air support or helicopters backing him up.

All he had was a slingshot and five smooth stones. That didn't make sense. In the natural, David seemed foolish going against a giant with such puny weapons. But when you know who you are and you know whose you are, then you understand that God has armed you with strength for every battle.

I have a very successful friend who started his company back in the early 1990s with only \$150. He didn't have credit. He didn't have rich backers. All he had was a dream in his heart.

He tried to get a loan from his bank, but they turned him down. He went to twenty-six banks altogether; they all refused to loan him money. He had twenty-six good reasons to just give up and quit.

But when God puts a dream in your heart, when He puts a promise on the inside, it doesn't matter if you get rejected three hundred times. It doesn't matter what you don't have. It doesn't matter how big that giant is. Deep down, you know that you and God are a majority.

You are anointed to accomplish your dreams.

You have been equipped by the Creator of the universe to overcome every obstacle. Forget what you lack. Look to who loves you. The same power who raised Christ from the dead lives inside you. You are well able.

My friend remembered this, and so he went to the twenty-seventh bank. There, his loan was approved. Today that young man runs a very successful company.

Like my friend and like David, you can defeat a giant with fewer resources. You can overcome an "untreatable" illness with God as your treatment. You can accomplish your dreams even though you lack the funds, the contacts, or the know-how.

You know that God's favor opens doors. You may have had twenty-six no's, but you believe that yes is waiting at number twenty-seven.

In the Old Testament, this huge army was about to attack a city. The soldiers were camped not far away, making plans for the attack. Four men crept out of the city toward the soldiers' camp. The men were lepers who figured they would probably be killed in the attack or die of their disease. And so instead of waiting for death, they made a move on the enemy's camp.

In the natural, it was an impossible situation. They seemed as good as dead. But these four men shared a faith that said, "Even though we're outnumbered a thousand to one, we will take a chance and see what our God will do."

The Scripture says that as the four closed in on the

enemy's camp, God caused the sound of their footsteps to be multiplied. And to the enemy it sounded like a huge army was coming against them. The four men didn't realize what was happening. They didn't hear the magnified sound of their footsteps. They just kept on walking.

They feared they were about to be captured and killed. But when you dare to take steps of faith—even when your goal seems impossible, even when you've failed time after time, even when you don't have the education or connections—God will take what you have and multiply it.

God will arrange things in your favor.

You may not see God's hand at work. But behind the scenes, He is multiplying what you need. He is causing people to hear what He wants them to hear. He is lining up the funds you lack. He is making the connections you need.

Your enemy may be powerful but, as Goliath learned, all it takes is one smooth stone. Or like those four lepers, all you may need is the sound of your feet. God's amplified sound of four men marching shook the ground as if hundreds of thousands were descending. The soldiers outside the city ran away in fear. The four lepers did not understand what was frightening their enemy. They asked a fleeing soldier, who he told them, "We're being attacked by a vast army. You've got to run for your lives."

Only then did it dawn on the lepers that they were the "vast army." They realized that when you stay in faith, God will cause people to see you the way He wants you to

be seen.

You may feel weak. You may think you don't have what it takes. But here's the secret: Don't act on what you feel. Act on what you know.

In your mind you may feel afraid. But in your heart, know that no weapon formed against you will ever prosper. You can do all things through Christ. If God be for you, who dare be against you?

You have exactly what you need. You may feel weak. You may feel intimidated. But God will multiply what you have. He will cause people to see you the way He wants you to be seen.

When God first appeared to Moses and told Moses that he was going to send him into Egypt to free the Children of Israel from their slavery, Moses was intimidated and afraid. At one point Moses asked God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" At another point he asked God, "What if they do not believe me or listen to me?"

I love God's response. God said to Moses, "Moses, what do you have in your hand?"

Moses was holding a shepherd's rod. He said in effect, "Oh nothing, God. Just an old stick—something I picked up along the way."

God said, "Throw it down on the ground."

Moses threw it down and it turned into a snake.

God said, "Pick it up."

Moses picked it up and it turned back into a rod. What was God saying?

"You have whatever you need. It may look like a mere stick, but if it needs to be a key to open a door, I'll turn it into a key. If it needs to be a shield to protect you, I'll turn it into a shield. If it needs to be healing to restore you, I'll turn it into that."

Quit looking at what you don't have. God is saying, 'I can become what you need.'

During World War II, a U.S. marine was separated from his unit during intense fighting. The smoke was so heavy, he became disoriented. He lost all contact with his comrades. He was alone in the jungle. He could hear the enemy soldiers getting closer and closer.

Then the marine saw a cliff riddled with caves. He ran to it and hid in a cave, hoping he wouldn't be found. There, he prayed for God's help and protection. As the soldier prayed, a spider dropped down over the entry of the cave and began spinning a web.

The marine had to laugh, despite his fears. "God, I need a brick wall, and You send me a spider?"

Still, as the spider created a thick web of many layers, the battlefield grew silent. The marine sat there for hours and hours. Then, he heard enemy soldiers checking nearby caves. He braced himself for his final stand. But when the enemy came to his cave, one of them noticed the huge spiderweb over the entry.

"We don't need to check in here," he said. "No one could have gone in without disturbing this web."

God supernaturally protected that marine's life. He later asked for God's forgiveness.

"When I saw that spider, I laughed," he said. "But now I realize with You a spider's web can be stronger than a brick wall."

God has us in the palm of His hand.

He has everything you need. And even if He doesn't have it, He can create it. He can cause a spider to spin a web and keep you out of trouble. He can cause one smooth stone to hit a giant and bring him down. God is in complete control.

So know that adversity in your life was never meant to defeat you. It was meant to promote you. When you have a problem, it's easy to think, "This is too big. I can't do it. It's just too much."

But understand that God never matches the problem to the size of the person. He matches it to the size of your destiny. So if you're facing a big challenge, keep it in the right perspective.

Don't get discouraged. Be encouraged. That's simply God setting you up for a major promotion, major increase. If you run from your problems and turn negative and sour, really, you're running from your destiny. If you'll learn to run to your problem, face it in faith, knowing that God is in control, knowing that He can become what you need,

then you are running to your destiny.

Isn't it interesting that after Goliath was defeated, we don't hear anything more about him? I believe that Goliath was created for David's purpose. He was created to establish David as a great man.

In the same way, the major challenges you encounter are put in your path to promote you. They are there so you can show who you really are. When others see God's favor on your life, when they see you rise above adversity, when they see you accomplish your God-given dreams, you honor God and prove His anointing in your life.

Your critics may think you don't deserve your dreams. They may think you are not talented or even doctrinally correct. But one thing for sure, when you defeat a Goliath, no one can doubt that God's favor is on you.

When Jesus healed a blind man, the religious crowd got all upset. They argued over why he was healed and how he was healed. They wondered who was to blame for his being blind in the first place.

The debate went on and on.

Finally, the blind man said, "Listen, you are confusing me. I can't answer all of your questions. All I can tell you is this: I was blind, but now I can see."

He was saying, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating. You can argue all day long, but the fact is I can see because of God's goodness in my life."

Some today think we're not supposed to be blessed. Some

think that God does not want us to prosper and live in victory. But the problem with that is it's too late to convince me, because God has already blessed me. He's already prospered me. He's already opened up supernatural doors.

Some don't believe that God can still heal. But it's too late to convince me. I've already seen how God healed my mother of terminal cancer in 1981. Some people don't think that your dreams can come to pass.

"Joel, you're just getting people's hopes up." It's too late to convince me. I'm living my dream. I've seen God do more than I could even ask or think.

When you defeat your Goliaths—your challenges and adversities—you establish yourself and you show others who you really are. Your victories prove God's anointing on your life.

You will encounter naysayers, people who doubt you and say, "Ah, she's not that talented." "He doesn't deserve that position." Or "Why did he marry her? She's not that attractive."

Know that you have more than talent. You have more than beauty. You have the favor of God. It's His anointing on your life.

Focus on faith.

To say focused on your dreams, you may have to tune out negative voices coming from others and from within too. I once heard somebody say, "Faith begins with stuffing your ears full of cotton." In other words, don't listen to the

negative thoughts or comments. People will try to talk you out of your dreams. When I first started ministering, I overheard people saying, "He can't preach. He's too young. He's not as good as his father."

So I found some cotton balls and put them in my ears. I've learned to always keep a fresh supply on hand. My father was the same way. When he started Lakewood in 1959 in a little run-down feed store, people told him, "Nobody will come to church out here. You're on the wrong side of town."

What did my dad do? Did he get down, discouraged, or give up?

Not my father. He put the cotton balls in his ears. He kept praying, kept believing, kept being his best. For forty years his church drew thousands of people every weekend. He built the foundation for everything Lakewood Church has become.

Many people let doubts take a stronghold in their minds. Something negative was spoken over them, they believed it, and suddenly it's holding them back. The first step to dealing with doubts is to determine how they were planted. Was it a family member who said you'd never be successful? Was it a teacher who predicted you'd never get an A? Was it a friend who said you'll never break your addiction?

Just because they didn't see it, just because they couldn't do it, doesn't mean you can't make it happen. Reprogram your thinking. Break free from the strongholds of doubt.

God would not have planted your dreams in your heart if

He had not already given you the talent, the creativity, the determination to see them come to pass. Ask yourself, "Who told me I don't have what it takes?" "Who told me I'm just average?" "Who told me I'm not talented enough?"

People don't determine our destiny; God does.

Helen dreamed of becoming an actress, but everyone told her she would never make it big because she was too small. She stood just five feet tall. So as a young woman, she did stretching exercises and tried all sorts of ways to increase her height. None of them worked.

She didn't grow any taller, but instead of being discouraged and listening to the naysayers, Helen focused on being the best actress she could be. She took what God had given her and made the most of it.

Helen knew that others did not determine her destiny. She did not dwell on what the doubters said. Instead, she focused on what God told her deep inside. And Helen Hayes became one of the greatest actresses of her day and one of the few women to win a Tony, an Oscar, an Emmy, and a Grammy.

It is ironic that late in her career, she won some of her greatest critical acclaim for her movie role as Mary, Queen of Scotland— one of the tallest queens in history. When someone asked her how someone so short could possibly take on that role, Helen Hayes said, "I am an actress. I will act tall."

She understood that God gave her everything she needed. Like her, you should never allow other people to tell you what you don't have or what you can't do.

David said in Psalm 3:1: "Lord, how are they increased that trouble me!" He was saying, "God, it looks like my enemies are multiplying."

Have you ever been there? You overcome one adversity, and it seems like something else comes against you. You finally make it through one sickness, and you find out something else is wrong.

In your job, one challenge can follow another. You go the extra mile, do the right thing, try to keep the peace. But then you find people you thought were friends are talking behind your back, stirring up trouble. Like that old saying, "When it rains, it pours."

That's how David felt. The reason he wrote this passage is because his son Absalom was trying to kill him and take over the kingdom. Sometimes we think, I can make it if my neighbor is against me. I can dig my heels in and be strong if it's my coworker, or my boss, or my competitor. But when it's our own family, when it's our own flesh and blood, it's easy to think, God, this is just not right. I don't know if I can go on.

David could have been overwhelmed. This could have been the point at which David faded off into the sunset, never to be heard from again. But the reason David was a champion—the reason he overcame every obstacle—can be found in this psalm's verse 3.

He didn't just stop with this one problem. He didn't just describe the situation and talk about how bad it was. He changed his locus. He said in effect, "God, I'm having all these problems. This is the worst thing I've ever faced."

Here it comes, verse 3: "But You, O Lord, are a shield for me, my glory and the lifter of my head."

What is the message? Don't ever let the opposition have the final word. There are times when we say, "The doctor's report doesn't look good. I don't feel well. I don't really see how I will make it. But You, O Lord, I know You can make a way."

Always add the "but." "Yes, I'm having tough times, but I know God will see me through." "Yes, my retirement fund was cut in half, but I know He's Jehovah Jireh. He will supply all of my needs."

Or how about this? "Yes, I've had this addiction a long time, but I know it's only temporary. My chains are broken. Whom the Son sets free is free indeed."

Too often we leave out the "but." "Well, Joel. I've just been through so much. It's unfair."

"Yes, but God said He would pay you back double for that injustice."

"Yeah, but my problems are so big. Goliath is so large."
"Yes, but God said when the enemy comes in like a flood, He would raise up a barrier."

Don't allow the opposition to have the final word.

You may be in the middle of a struggle, but you've got to have the right perspective. That challenge was never meant to destroy you. It was meant to promote you. The very fact that you are facing adversity tells me that your destiny is within reach.

When David faced Goliath, deep down he knew something great was about to happen. He didn't get discouraged. He got encouraged by it. In the same way, I'll just declare it: When you come through that adversity, you will reach a new level. You will see God's favor like you've never seen it before. That problem will be the catalyst for God to open up supernatural doors.

I challenge you to be strong in the Lord. Put on the whole armor of God. Get up each day knowing not only who you are, but whose you are. No obstacle will hold you back. What was meant to harm you, God will turn to your advantage.

The problems you are struggling with right now, because you're in faith, because you trust in the Most High, will not defeat you. Those problems will promote you. You will come out better off than you were before. I speak strength into you. I speak encouragement. I speak health. I speak favor. I speak determination. I speak new levels of increase. I declare victory over each one of your lives. In the name of Jesus.

CHAPTER 19

The Anointing Of Ease

We all go through times that are more difficult than others; times when we are not making much progress. We work hard but don't see promotion. We do our best in relationships, but they still seem stagnant. There are times in our finances when it is one struggle after another.

If we aren't careful, we can lose our enthusiasm and think this is the way it always will be. But Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

There is something I call the anointing of ease. When you step into this anointing, what was difficult all of a sudden becomes easy. Things you struggled with are not a struggle anymore. There is a supernatural grace, a favor that lightens the load and takes the pressure off. Scripture describes this as God going before you and making crooked places straight, rough places smooth.

I was alone on a business trip, without the usual gang of Victoria, our kids, friends of kids, and nieces and nephews. I thought I was traveling light. But after my meetings, I ended up with a load of paperwork to carry in a big folder, along with my suitcase, a suit bag, and my briefcase with my computer.

I left my hotel room and headed down the hall to the elevator in a hurry to check out. But I was struggling to

carry everything. I was concerned that I might be running late to catch my plane. I'd walked only about twenty steps down the hall when a young hotel bellman came out of nowhere.

"Sir, let me get that for you," he said.

He didn't grab just one bag. He took command of my entire load. Freed of my burdens, I walked with him toward the elevator where a crowd of other guests had gathered. It looked like everyone had decided to check out at the same time.

My bellman gave me a nod and whispered, "Follow me." He led me through a maze of hallways until we came to the service elevator. He punched a button, and within seconds the doors opened to an empty elevator car. I was in the lobby and checked out within a few minutes, thanks to his help.

My ride to the airport went smoothly. I thought I was back on schedule, but then I ran into an unexpected delay. The security line at the airport was very long. It looked like it could take a half hour or more to get through. Again, I was fretting a bit, when a gentleman wearing a badge walked up to me and said, "Follow me, Pastor Osteen."

I figured either I'd made the Terrorist Watch List, or this was the favor of God blessing me again. Thankfully, it was God at work and not the FBI. The security man took my bags through for me. He commandeered a cart and drove me to my gate, telling me along the way that he recognized me from our television broadcasts and that he was glad to help me out.

My streak did not end there. I arrived home later that evening, relieved to be back with my family. After saying hello to everyone, I settled into my favorite chair. I was just planning to relax before dinner, but Victoria surprised me. She brought my meal to me on a tray. At that moment, I knew the day of miracles was not over!

You might think that God has more important things on His mind than helping someone check out of a hotel or catch a plane, that He has bigger things to deal with. But you should never forget you are God's biggest deal. You are the apple of His eye. You are His most prized possession.

Don't ever doubt that you are God's favorite child!

King David declared in Psalm 23:5 "You [God] anoint my head with oil."

He was not referring to tanning oil. David was speaking of the type of oil that makes things flow. Whenever there is friction, whenever something is sticking, you apply oil to lubricate it and make it run more smoothly.

That's what God will do for you. He will anoint your head with oil. David next wrote of what happened after his anointing: "Because God anoints me, because I walk in His favor, surely, goodness and mercy will follow me everywhere I go."

Throughout this book, I've encouraged you to stay in faith through hard times and when personal challenges linger. I've promised you that if you hold on to your faith, pray, and don't give in to depression or discouragement, better days will come.

The first sign of this is when you experience an anointing of ease. When you step into an anointing of ease, you won't struggle anymore. You will feel a supernatural grace, a favor that lightens the load and takes off the pressure.

Brian told me about his own experience with an anointing of ease. He'd left college early to work as a salesman for a small manufacturing company. He'd done well, built up a loyal group of customers. Brian is an honest, hardworking man who believes that businesses are built on trusting relationships. So he was very discouraged when he learned that his bosses were cheating one of their best customers.

After mulling it over, Brian decided that he could no longer work for a dishonest company. He didn't have a college degree. He didn't have another job lined up. He and his wife had just become parents for the first time. Still, he couldn't cheat people who trusted him. Before he turned in his resignation, Brian told the customer that he was being overbilled. The customer was upset but thanked him for his honesty and wished him well.

It was a challenging time for Brian. He'd worked hard to learn the business and to build up his list of clients. He worried about his family's future. Then, a few weeks after he'd quit his job, Brian received a phone call from the client who'd been cheated.

"I'd like to help you start your own company," the client said. "I'll finance your startup, and I will be your first customer."

In the months that followed, Brian built up his own business. Several other former customers switched over to his company because of the trusting relationships he'd had with them. Within a few years, his business was thriving. Eventually, he bought out his partner, and then he reaped the full rewards of his honest efforts.

Brian stepped into an anointing of ease. What he couldn't make happen on his own, God made happen for him. He made a tough decision to do the right thing. He weathered hard times. He endured sleepless nights. Then, God stepped in and turned off the pressure.

Maybe, like Brian, you have struggled in some aspect of your life. Let me assure you that if you stay in faith, you will come into your own anointing of ease. God has promised He will go before you and smooth your path. He will make your life easier.

In time, you too will hit your stride and everything will fall into place. You will get breaks that you may feel are undeserved, blessings that are beyond your dreams. Problems that have plagued you for years will be resolved. Long-standing promises finally will come to pass.

You may have had more than your share of bad news. Difficult times may have you feeling like a swimmer caught in a riptide current: No matter what you do, you seem to be pulled farther and farther out to sea.

Life can be difficult. And there are no guarantees that you'll never have a problem even if you stay in faith. Still, God can provide peace even in the midst of a challenge. Even during those times when you should be losing sleep,

He can calm your nerves and lift your burden. In hard times, know that God is still on the throne. Know He is working things out for your good.

Prepare yourself for your anointing of ease.

Your day is due, so light the fires and prepare for takeoff. The anointing of ease is on the way. You will see supernatural increase, supernatural opportunities, supernatural promotion. Wall Street may be down, but Wall Street is not your source. God is your source. He will open doors that no person can keep closed. He will show up and show out in your life in unusual ways. What might have taken you a lifetime to accomplish will happen in a much shorter period because of His favor, His blessing, His goodness.

You will look back in amazement and say, "How did I reach this point? God has been good to me. He has outdone Himself in my life."

That is the anointing of ease.

God is about to reward your faithfulness. Get your hopes up. Raise your expectations. Expect the unexpected. Dare to dream your greatest dreams.

He will give you the grace to handle anything that comes your way.

You are not a victim of the bad economy. You are not a victim of an illness. You are not a victim of your childhood or of anything inflicted on you by another.

When you step into your anointing of ease, you will no

longer feel discouraged or despondent. You will bask in faith, hope, and expectations. God will show up and make your crooked places straight. You will look up and say, "My struggle is over. God relieved the pressure. My life is back on track."

You may not be there just yet, but every day you should pray: "Father, thank you that I'm coming into my anointing of ease. Thank you that You're fighting my battles for me, making my rough places smooth, giving me the desires of my heart."

If the anointing of ease sounds too good to be true, I suggest you consider little Sheila who was born into a life of poverty and despair in the slums of Haiti. Her father died shortly after she was born, and her mother, who had many other children, took Sheila to an orphanage because she could not care for her.

Yet there were more challenges for this poor child. She was born with albinism, which affects only 1 in every 17,000 people. As an albino person, she was born without the melanin pigment that gives color to eyes, skin, and hair. Though she was otherwise a normal, bright child, Sheila stood out with her very pale skin and white hair compared to most dark skinned Haitians.

Albino children don't just look different, they need special care. They usually have serious vision problems, and their skin is extremely sensitive to the sun. Haitian children with albinism have a particularly difficult time not only because of that nation's poor health care system but also because less-educated Haitians believe albinos are cursed.

As an albino child in an orphanage in the poorest nation

in the Western Hemisphere, little Sheila faced more challenges than most people ever encounter. It didn't look like she would ever be free from a life of trouble and despair, but God was still in control. He still had a plan.

One day, she was photographed with a group of other orphans by a visiting American who'd come with a church group to do volunteer work at the orphanage. The person who took the photograph sent it to a friend in the United States who has a son with albinism.

Dawn Guetti saw Sheila in the photograph and could not get her out of her mind. She saw that Sheila was suffering from sun rashes and other skin problems due to her condition. Dawn knew the challenges her albino son Corey faced even though he had a loving family and the best medical care. This mother from upstate New York was haunted by the thought of Sheila suffering in Haiti's tropical sun.

Dawn Guetti felt God was calling upon her family to adopt the child in the photograph. She and her husband told their friends, who knew it would be expensive to arrange an overseas adoption. Members of their church staged fund-raising drives to help. They raised tens of thousands of dollars. And so began the anointing of ease for the former orphan girl, Sheila Guetti, now living in upstate New York with a loving Christian family.

A new day will dawn with your anointing of ease.

With your anointing of ease, strangers will go out of their way to be kind to you. You will be blessed with creativity, wisdom, and good ideas.

When you are anointed with ease, you don't sweat the small stuff or the big stuff. You flow right through insults, frustrations, and challenges. God's anointing on your life will bring greater opportunities, helpful mentors, and important connections your way.

I encourage you to thank God for His anointing of ease. As you begin your day, just say, "Father, thank you for Your favor in my life today. Thank you for causing me to be at the right place at the right time. Thank you for Your wisdom to make good decisions, Your grace to handle any challenge, Your strength to overcome any adversity, and Your faith to believe for big things."

When you get in agreement with God by declaring His favor and His promises over your life, you won't drag through the day down and defeated. You won't receive the short end of the stick. The Scripture says, "Your cup will run over." Instead of feeling worn out, you'll run over with energy, good ideas, divine health, financial success, and joy.

Expect God's anointing, and you will run over with His blessings and favor.

Our daughter Alexandra was ten years old when she came up to me one day and asked for ten dollars to go to the movies. I told her to go to my bedroom closet and take a ten-dollar bill from my wallet on the dresser.

"Thanks," she said.

But then she headed toward the front door instead.

"Aren't you going to get the money from my closet?" I

asked. Alexandra smiled. "I already did, Daddy. I knew you would say yes."

I was glad for her confidence in me. I love the fact that she knows I want to be good to her. God feels the same way about all of us. You may not realize it, but God has already said yes to His promises for you.

You don't have to beg God to be good to you. You don't have to beg God to help you. God wants to help you. The Scripture says that all of His promises are "Yes" and "Amen."

You need to go out every day knowing that God wants to help you. He wants to help you drive through traffic. He wants to help you shop for groceries, cook for your children, and deal with challenges at work.

Thank Him every day for that anointing of ease.

You need not worry. Your life will not be a constant struggle. Yes, there will be hard times and challenges, but don't you dare dwell on them. God has lined up the right breaks, the right opportunities, the right people in your future. Those hard times will end and give way to the best of times.

I love that God likes to outdo Himself. He doesn't just meet our needs. He doesn't just make our lives easier. He does more for us than we can think to ask of Him.

Sherian Cadoria grew up "the poorest of poor" in a small Louisiana town in the 1940s and 1950s. Her parents were tenant workers on a cotton plantation. When Sherian was three years old, her father was injured in an accident and

had to be hospitalized for the rest of his life. The landlord of their farm kicked them out because her father could no longer work.

Her mother loaded a wagon and moved into a two-room house with no electricity or running water. She used pages from the Sears catalog to cover all the holes in the walls, ceiling, and floor. As soon as Sherian Cadoria could walk, she joined her mother, sister, and brother in the cotton fields. By the time she was ten, she could pick 250 pounds of cotton a day.

Despite the poverty and the discrimination, Sherian learned that she must make use of the gifts God had given her. Sherian's anointing of ease began when she enrolled in Southern University, a historically black college, in Baton Rouge. There, she entered a training program for women planning on military careers. Even though the Ku Klux Klan was demonstrating to stop black people from entering the military, she persevered. She was refused service in most restaurants and hotels, but she stayed in faith. She became the first woman to command an all-male battalion of military police. This child of poverty who grew up picking cotton later served thirty-three months in Vietnam. She went on to a twenty nine year military career before retiring with the rank of brigadier general. She had become the highest-ranking woman in the military, the first African American female with the rank of general in the United States Army, and the first black woman to serve as a director on the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

If you'll stay in faith and be your best each day, God will amaze you with His goodness. You will look back and say, "Wow! God has been so good to me. I never dreamed I'd

go so far, so fast."

God directs our steps.

I had to deal with a difficult situation recently. It was a business matter. I needed some expert legal advice. I was on the road, so I called a lawyer friend of mine in Houston. He recommended one of his associates. Unfortunately, this expert had just left town on a two-week business trip.

I told my friend I didn't have two weeks to get this matter straightened out. I needed to get something set up before I returned home.

"Where are you?" he asked.

I told him.

"You've got to be kidding," my friend said. "That's exactly where my associate is headed. He'll be there in a few hours."

When I heard that, I knew God was still on the throne. There I was, thousands of miles from home, and God sent just the man I needed right to me. It turned out that he was staying five minutes away from me.

God directs every one of your steps. He lines up solutions to your problems. He lines up the breaks that you need. I want you to go out each day knowing that there is favor in your future. Restoration awaits. Healing and good breaks are in store for you.

Right now you may feel as though you are just trying to

survive. I encourage you to keep pressing forward instead. God has another victory in your future. You don't know the anointing of ease awaiting you.

God will take you places you've never even dreamed of.

You will accomplish goals that you never thought possible. You will overcome obstacles that seemed insurmountable. You may get knocked down every once in a while, but you will never get knocked out. You are a child of the Most High God. He has you in the palm of His hand.

I believe God is breathing new hope into your dreams. He's breathing new life into your heart. He's breathing a bigger vision into your spirit. One Scripture passage says: "It's not by our might. It's not by our power. But it's by the breath of Almighty God."

As God breathes on your life, things will get easier. Negative situations will turn around. You will feel wise beyond your years. Your determination will grow. You will refuse to quit.

Where will your new strength come from? God is breathing on your life. He's making things easier. Everywhere you go, imagine the most powerful force in the universe blowing in your direction. Your anointing of ease will begin. You may sell property that you could not sell before. You may find a better job, a great opportunity, a relationship more fulfilling than any you've imagined. Or maybe someone unexpected will reach out to help you.

Expect your anointing of ease. God is breathing in your direction.

Frieda, a single mother with our church, was struggling to make ends meet. She was working long hours. She was hurting because she couldn't be with her children as much as they needed. She also had no free time for herself, no time to date or socialize.

This good and hardworking woman told me she was feeling frustrated. Frieda couldn't see a way out of her situation. She didn't see any signs that her life would improve. Then, a few weeks later, the Creator of the universe provided an anointing of ease.

Frieda did not see it coming. She was about to give up. Fortunately, she stayed in faith and kept pressing forward. Others might have kept looking back, wondering why they couldn't catch a break. Frieda kept thanking God for His favor. And He directed her steps.

Shortly after we spoke, Frieda was approached by a neighbor she hardly knew. The neighbor had observed her struggles. He and his wife wanted to help. They bought her a new car. Grateful, Frieda then sold her old car, which enabled her to pay off some debt.

Now she doesn't have to work such long hours. That one unexpected gift took the pressure off.

"Joel, a load has been lifted off of me," she said.

God granted Frieda an anointing of ease to make her life better. You may face similar problems. You may be stressed about your future. I encourage you to find a

place of peace. When you're in peace, you are in a position of power. You can say, "God, I trust You. I may not see a way, but I know You still have a way. So I will go out each day, being my best, being productive at work, being a blessing to somebody else, and not looking back regretting the past. I'm pressing forward in faith."

When you do that, you might as well get ready. You will receive God's anointing of ease.

God knows every need you will ever have. You don't have to figure it all out: How will you erase your debts? How will you get healthy? How will you survive difficult times? All you have to do is have faith. Dare to believe that God is in control. Believe He's got you in the palm of His hand. Believe that an anointing of ease awaits you.

Psalm 126 in the Message translation says: "It seemed like a dream, too good to be true, when God returned Zion's exiles. . . . And now, God, do it again ... so those who went off with heavy hearts will come out laughing with armloads of blessings."

That is God's dream. When you have a heavy heart, when life deals you a difficult blow, God wants to turn it around, not only to bring you out but to bring you out with a smile, better off than you were before, "with armloads of blessing."

I don't know about you, but I've seen God do amazing things. I've experienced firsthand some of those armloads of blessings. When I look back over my life, I can say with the psalmist, "It's like a dream too good to be true." Now my prayer for you is: "God, do it again. Do it for my friends. Show them Your unprecedented favor. Pour out

Your goodness, Your blessings, Your mercy, Your grace.
God, let their dreams suddenly come to pass."

Know this today: If God did it for me, He certainly can do it for you. Get up each day with expectancy. Have the attitude, "God, I'm looking for my anointing of ease. I'm looking for armloads of blessings You have placed in my path."

When you release your faith in that manner, it will lead you to the good things God has in store for you. Maybe you are struggling. But this is a new day. You are coming into your anointing of ease. You will feel a supernatural strength. God will give you the grace to face your challenges.

You will get breaks you may feel are undeserved. Problems you've dealt with for years will suddenly disappear. You might as well get ready, because God will not simply bring you out, He will bring you out laughing, full of joy, full of faith, full of victory! It's time to trust.

PART FIVE

IT'S TIME TO STRETCH

CHAPTER 20

Stepping Into Your Divine Destiny

Gabriela's photography business was going great just a few years ago. She was shooting as many as fifty weddings a year in Houston. She finally needed a break to catch up with her husband and four kids.

Gabriela, who is known as "Gaby," took a couple of years off. Unfortunately, when she was ready to return to her wedding photography business full-time, the economy was crashing.

Like millions of professionals and wage workers across the country, Gaby had to step back and look at other options during the recession. To her credit, she did not despair. Instead, Gaby decided to go after her dream.

"For ten years, I'd dreamed about being the photographer for my church, Lakewood Church," she said. "But I'd had that dream sitting up on a shelf collecting dust."

Gaby didn't tell me or Victoria about her dream of working for us. We were well aware of her photography talents because she had done weddings and family portraits for many of our church and staff members. She'd even made my brother Paul look good, and that's not easy to do!

We might never have known that she wanted to put her talents to work for us if her family had not encouraged her. Gaby woke up one morning, went into the bathroom,

and found a message written on the mirror: Who are You? Then when she went to the kitchen, there was another sign by the coffeepot: Who Are You? Another sign waited in the living room near her office: Who Are You?

Everywhere she looked, all over the house, her family had left the same sign urging her to pursue her divine destiny. Their faith and support got to Gaby. She finally made a move by asking for a five-minute meeting with one of our executives. When she completed her presentation, he welcomed her into the fold.

"The fact that you are in my office today is incredible," he said. "Just last week I had a meeting with Joel, and we discussed the need to hire a photographer to cover all of what is going on here."

Today Gaby is our church photographer, but only because she made a move and then God moved on her life. She is truly living her divine destiny.

It's time to stretch!

Every one of us has secret dreams and desires along with seeds of greatness implanted within us. You too have gifts to share with this world. There is buried treasure within you, waiting to be discovered. Your full potential has not been released, yet. Your God-given divine destiny awaits you.

Too often we procrastinate or we allow negative thoughts and self-doubt to discourage us from chasing our dreams. As a result our gifts go undeveloped. Sometimes we allow disappointments and failures to steal our confidence, and again, our treasures remain buried. Insecurities and low

self-esteem can convince us that we have nothing special to offer.

God did not create you to be ordinary. He did not bestow gifts so that they could go undiscovered or grant potential that would be unfulfilled. Despite the discouragement you've heard, regardless of the hurts, challenges, or insults you've experienced, God gave you all that you need to achieve your destiny. All of the talents, skills, personality traits—all the treasures that lie within you came from Him.

You have unique gifts and attributes. No one else has your exact combination. I urge you to understand that and to step into your destiny. The world will not be as bright as it could be if you don't release the full glow of your and reflect God's glory.

No one can take your place. When God created you, He threw away the mold. Don't make the mistake of comparing yourself with others. If God wanted you to have their exact gifts, He would have given them to you. If He wanted you to look like them and share the same personality, He would have created you that way. To fulfill your destiny, you don't need what they have. You need only what lies within.

God matched you with your world, your circumstances, and your environment. He decided what your purpose would be in that world. He gave you an assignment to fulfill. Then He granted you the gifts, the talents, the looks, the creativity, the personality to get the job done. He equipped you with exactly what you need. If you needed to be taller, God would have made you taller. If you needed language skills, God gave them to you. If you

needed musical talent, God granted that gift to you. Do not take for granted any of your gifts. Do not complain about those you wish you had. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. God made you fully loaded and totally equipped. He chose your features in the same way that you select a car. You can purchase a car totally stripped down. Just the basics. No air-conditioning. No power windows. No radio. Just a standard car.

But know this: When God made you, He had all the options put on. You are not a want-to-be. You are not a stripped-down version of the real thing. You are fully loaded and totally equipped.

When God created you, He said, "I want the deluxe package. I want the chrome wheels. I want the sun roof. I want the navigation. I want the stereo with surround. And, oh yeah, don't forget my pinstripes."

Some of you got a sedan. Some of you got a compact. Some of you got a truck. Some of you got a low rider. Don't be discouraged even if you got a station wagon, like my brother Paul.

Whatever God has given you, He made you fully loaded and totally equipped. I realize I may not have what someone else has. He may be a Ferrari and I'm a Ford. But I'm not the least bit worried. I know I have what I need to fulfill my purpose.

It's when we try to be something we're not that life gets frustrating. I've learned it's easy to be me. I don't have to perform. I don't have to manipulate things. I can just relax and be myself.

Do you know I can be a better me than anybody else in the whole world? Why? I'm anointed to be me. You are anointed to be you. Nobody can beat you at being you. Quit worrying about what you don't have. Instead, be the best that you can possibly be.

When I first started ministering, I was very intimidated, very unsure of myself. I would hear other ministers who were so dynamic. Many of them could not only speak exceptionally well, but they could even sing incredibly well. At the end of their sermons, they'd just burst out into song, and they were so effective, they'd almost give you chill bumps.

I'd think, God, why can't I sing like that? Why don't I have their gift? But one day I realized God has given me what I need. If they have it and I don't, it must mean that I don't need it. And, yes, they may be able to sing exceptionally well, but I know this: Their jokes aren't as good as mine.

You are fully loaded and totally equipped. Don't you dare go around thinking, Oh, I don't have what it takes. No, you go around saying, "I am anointed. I am empowered. I am talented. I am creative. I am a fully loaded person."

Many years ago, this young lady, Phyllis Driver, went to the theater and heard a girl singing so beautifully. She told her friends, "If I could just sing like that, then I'd be successful." Then, she went to the movies and saw an actress giving an award-winning performance. This time, she thought, If I could just act like that, then I'd be successful.

But one day someone told her what I'm telling you. And instead of looking at others, complaining about what she

didn't have, she looked inside and discovered what she did have. She remembered how all through school, she was constantly making people laugh. She was naturally funny. She had this gift for humor.

That young lady went on to develop her gift for making people laugh, and as Phyllis Diller, she became a pioneering female comedian with a long and successful career. It's interesting that Phyllis Diller didn't have the beautiful looks like the movie actress she saw. She didn't have the incredible voice like the young lady she heard singing. In fact, her voice is very scratchy and gruff.

But when God created you, He didn't make any mistakes. Instead of looking at others, thinking about what you don't have, why don't you look inside and discover what you do have?

The fingerprints of God are all over you.

Before you were born, God knew you. He has planned out all your days for good. Don't let your potential lie dormant. Tap into that buried treasure. Share your gift with the world. You have more in you. There is talent you've not yet discovered. You may have had some great victories in your past, but that is nothing compared to what God has in your future. If you will see yourself as a fully loaded person, totally equipped, then as you stretch your faith, God will show up and show out in amazing ways.

I know you are not average. You are not ordinary. You are fully loaded. And I'm declaring that the treasure buried in you will come out. I'm calling forth the dreams, the gifts, the talents, the businesses, the ideas, the inventions, the

books, the songs, the movies. I'm calling forth your untapped potential.

You will be stepping into a new season. You will have a confidence to do things you wouldn't do before. You will feel a supernatural strength. Supernatural doors will open up for you. Supernatural opportunities are coming your way. Don't shrink back. Don't be intimidated. The Creator of the universe has not only equipped and empowered you, He's also breathing in your direction. He's breathing creativity. He's breathing confidence. He's breathing ideas. He's breathing restoration.

God is saying to you what He said to Joshua: "Be strong and of good courage, for the Lord your God is with you."

You may have been told a thousand times what you can't do. But I'm here to tell you what you can do. You can overcome every obstacle. You can prosper in spite of the economy. You can be healthy and whole once again. You can recover from a fall. You can become all that God created you to be. You are a can-do person fully loaded and totally equipped.

But if you don't understand who you are, then you'll never have the confidence to get out of your comfort zone and take steps of faith. This is imperative to fulfilling your destiny. I've learned that when I make a move, God will make a move. When I get out of my comfort zone and stretch my faith, then God will release more of my favor. When I think bigger, God will act bigger.

When I believe I can rise higher and I put my shoulders back and I hold my head up high and walk like I'm a child of the Most High God, that is when God shows up and

shows out in unusual ways.

In the Scripture, when Lazarus died, Jesus said to the disciples, "Roll away the stone and I'll raise Lazarus." It's interesting: Jesus could have rolled away the stone. Here Jesus was about to raise a dead man. But it was the principle; God expects us to do what we can and then He will do what we can't.

If you will do the natural, God will do the supernatural. If you will do the ordinary, God will do the extraordinary. But God will not do for you what you can do for yourself.

"Well," you say, "Joel, I never get promoted. I never get any good breaks."

Let me ask you: Are you rolling away the stone? Do you make work on time each day? Are you giving it your best? Are you productive? Do you have a good attitude? If you will do what you can, God will do what you cannot.

Maybe you're single and you have a desire to get married. You cannot sit at home every night watching television praying that Miss America will come knocking on your door. You need to get out and meet some new friends. Go to the mall. Get some new clothes. Dress better. Look better.

You are a fully loaded person. You have a lot to offer. When somebody marries you, they're getting a prize. You are extremely valuable. You have the fingerprints of God all over you. But you've got to see yourself the right way.

"Joel, I'm kind of shy. I'm reserved "

So am I, but I stand in front of thousands of people every week. Do you know how much nerve it took me to even call Victoria and ask her out on our first date? It took me two weeks to get my courage up. I finally convinced myself that I am a fully loaded person and she would be absolutely crazy to say no to me. I called her. She said yes and I nearly passed out.

After twenty-two years of marriage, I can tell you that Victoria is fully loaded and totally equipped. She's one of a kind. My point is that when you make a move, God will make a move. You do the natural, and God will do the supernatural. You may be stuck in your comfort zone. You're a fully loaded person using about 10 percent of what God has given you. I want to stir you out of complacency.

If you are not uncomfortable once in a while, then you're not really using your faith. Faith is all about stretching. Your obstacles, challenges, and opportunities may seem intimidating, but God would not have presented them to you if He had not known already that you have what it takes.

Get where you are supposed to be.

I would rather try and fail every once in a while than come to the end of my life and wonder what might have happened if I had taken that risk. Many people are living in the safe zone. But I want to get you over into the faith zone. That's where you'll see God do amazing things.

The Scriptures tell of a city about to be destroyed. An angel told Lot to go to a certain place. But Lot wasn't moving fast enough, so the angel said, "Hurry, Lot. I can't

do anything until you get there."

I believe God says the same to each one of us: "I can't move in your life like I want to. I can't release my favor in a greater way until you get where you're supposed to be."

Your place of destiny may not even be somewhere physical. It may be in your thoughts, in your mind. You cannot go around with low self-esteem, thinking that you don't have what it takes.

You must believe you are fully loaded and think like you are totally equipped. You can't have the attitude that your business will never make it in this economy. Or that you lost too much in the stock market.

"I'll probably never recover. Joel, I got laid off. I don't think I'll ever get another job."

No. You are a fully loaded person.

When one door closes, God will open up another. Your setbacks are not a surprise to God. He had the solution before you even had the problem. He has armed you with strength for every battle. You need to pack up and move over into faith. God is saying to you what He said to Lot: "Hurry up and get there so I can show you my favor in a greater way."

Reach for God's guiding hand.

A friend told me a story of a five-year-old boy who loved the piano. At every opportunity, he would sit down and fiddle around on the keyboard. He'd never had lessons or any kind of formal training. The boy was often told that

he was too small, too young to play the piano. Despite those discouraging words, he continued to practice and practice.

The only song he knew how to play was "Chopsticks." Just a very simple tune. But he played it again and again. One day, his father surprised him with tickets for the symphony. A world-renowned Italian pianist was playing. This master musician was one of the greatest pianists in modern times.

On the night of the concert, as they were walking to their seats in the auditorium, the little boy saw the beautiful grand piano on stage, behind the curtain. While no one noticed, he snuck over and sat down on the piano bench. He then began to play his elementary version of "Chopsticks."

About that time, the curtain began to rise. Everyone expected to see the world-famous master pianist. Instead, they saw a little boy hunched over the piano playing "Chopsticks."

He was so caught up in his playing that he didn't realize anyone was watching. When he did notice, he was petrified. Just as he was about to get up and run off, the boy felt two big arms reaching around him. Then, two large hands landed on the piano keys next to his.

It was the master pianist. He whispered in the little boy's ear, "Keep playing." And as the little boy continued to play his simple rendition of "Chopsticks," the pianist joined in with a Beethoven symphony piece scored in the same cadence and the same key.

Under the direction of the master, he brought the rest of the orchestra in. First, he brought in the woodwinds, then the brass, then the percussion. The boy's father sat there with tears coming down his cheeks. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He never dreamed the simple tune that he heard in his living room each day would no longer sound like "Chopsticks," but would become a full, beautifully orchestrated Beethoven symphony.

What was the difference? The master stepped in. Sometimes, you may feel like you don't have the talent, the wisdom, the know-how. The good news is, God does. When you use what you have, the Master will step in. He will put His hands on top of your hands. He'll take what you think is very average—average gifts, average talent, average ability. But when the Master steps in, He'll put His super with your natural, and supernatural things will begin to happen.

Like that little boy, you'll be amazed. You will think, I know what I normally sound like. I know what I'm capable of. How did I end up like this?

Here's how: The Master stepped in.

When I started ministering ten years ago, my first few sermons were so basic and so elementary. Like this little boy, I'm sure they sounded about like "Chopsticks" (and don't you say "Amen").

I had never ministered before, but I was doing the best I could, using what God had given me. The negative thoughts bombarded my mind: Joel, you don't have what it takes. You're not a minister. You're too shy. You're too quiet. You better stay in your safe zone.

I had to keep shaking off those thoughts. I had to remind myself that I am a fully loaded person. I'm anointed. I'm equipped. I'm talented. I can do all things through Christ.

Then the Master stepped in. God put His hands on my hands. He put His voice in my voice. I discovered talents I didn't know I had. If you had told me ten years ago that one day I would minister in Yankee Stadium, I would have said, "Yeah, right. And you can land an airplane safely in the Hudson River."

My friend, when the Master steps in, supernatural things will happen. You may think you will never accomplish your dreams. You may think you don't have the talent, the resources, the connections.

You may not have those things. But know this: God does. And as you take steps toward your destiny, God will show up. You have to put a demand on your faith. If you play it safe all the time, you'll never know what's on the inside.

I believe that as you stretch your faith in the coming days, you will see the Master step in. You will have the courage to do things you wouldn't do before. You will discover an ability you didn't know was in you. God will take your natural and mix His super with it, and instead of just playing "Chopsticks" like the little boy, you will hear God bring in the percussion.

You will receive supernatural breaks. And just when you thought it couldn't get any better, God will bring in the brass—the right people.

Then the woodwinds—the right opportunity.

And before long, you will hear the sound of a beautiful orchestra. Your gifts and blessings will appear. You will know like I know: This is not just my talent. This is not just my ability. This is the Master joining in.

God takes our ordinary and makes it extraordinary.

Police officer Julia Burney-Witherspoon once patrolled a very rough area of her hometown, Racine, Wisconsin. The oldest of twelve, she'd taught her brothers and sisters to read. She'd always wanted to help other children read too.

When she'd be sent on police calls to troubled homes, this officer would often notice that the children had no books to read. This just broke her heart. She wanted to do something about it. But what could she do? She had limited resources.

Instead of giving up and thinking it would never happen, she kept hoping, praying, and believing. Then one night she answered a false alarm at this huge warehouse. When she flipped the lights on, she saw thousands of children's books just waiting to be destroyed. They were brand-new but had been discarded because they had little imperfections.

"When I saw those books, I knew they were mine," Officer Burney-Witherspoon said.

She asked the warehouse owner if she could have the imperfect books. "Fine, they're all yours," he said.

At first, the policewoman and her fellow officers tried to distribute the books from their patrol cars. Eventually she

raised the money to open a community reading center where children and their parents could come. Now when she patrols her area, Officer Burney-Witherspoon constantly sees kids sitting on the sidewalk, sitting on the front porch, reading these children's books.

What happened? The Master stepped in. God made a way where it looked like there was no way.

The Scripture says, "No good thing will God withhold when you walk uprightly." When you live a life of excellence and integrity, a life that's pleasing to the Lord, God will bring your dreams to pass. He will cause you to be at the right place at the right time. You will find yourself even stumbling into God's blessings.

Dare to dream big. Think big. Believe big.

You are a fully loaded person. You are totally equipped. Like Officer Burney-Witherspoon, you may not have the resources right now. But that's okay. God does. As you take steps toward your divine destiny, God will release more of His favor.

Don't be surprised when things fall into place. That's not a lucky break. That's not a coincidence. That's the Master stepping in.

Don't be surprised when you have wisdom beyond your years. When you get breaks you didn't deserve. When you accomplish more than you thought possible. That's God putting His hands on your hands. That's the Master breathing in your direction.

A friend told us about her mother in law, who'd wanted to

be an opera singer ever since she was a little girl. She was extremely talented. All through junior high and high school, she was chosen to sing the lead in class musicals.

But when it came time for college, her parents said, "You'll never make a living as an opera singer. That's not a good idea. You need to get a normal degree."

They talked her out of what she felt in her heart. She went on and earned her degree and lived a happy and a blessed life. Then, when she was ninety years old, she moved into a senior citizens home. Her husband had gone to be with the Lord, and her mind was not as sharp as it should be. She suffered a little from dementia.

But every day in the seniors home, she would stand in front of all the people and sing the most beautiful opera you could ever imagine. She sounded like an angel. In fact, people came from all over just to hear this ninety-year-old woman sing.

What was that? She had buried treasure on the inside. Her gift had been pushed down for nearly ninety years, but it was still alive just waiting to be released.

My challenge to you is: Don't die with the music still in you. Share your gift with this world. You can go further than you think. You can accomplish more than you've accomplished.

No matter what you've gone through, no matter how long it's been, your seeds of greatness are still alive and well. You can still become everything that God has created you to be.

Make your mark the highest possible.

A professor at a major university was about to pass out the final exam, the most important test of the year for his class. But first, he told his students how proud he was of them, how disciplined they had been, and how they just worked so hard.

Since they had done so well, he made them a special offer. He said, "Anyone who would like to get an automatic C on this test, just raise your hand and you don't even have to take the test. I'll just give you a C."

One hand went up. Then another, and another, and another until about half of the class had opted out of taking the test. Those students received the automatic C. They were so happy. They left full of joy.

The professor then passed out tests to the rest of the students. He placed the forms on their desks and asked them not to turn them over until instructed to do so. For the next few minutes, he encouraged them and told how they would do great things in life. He congratulated them for not settling for a mediocre grade. "You are willing to strive to do your best, to fulfill your highest potential, and you will be rewarded for that all of your lives," he said.

Then the professor gave his students the okay to turn their tests over and begin. Well, they discovered their tests had just two short sentences: "Congratulations. You've just made an A."

Too often, we take the easy way out. We sit back and settle for mediocrity when we should strive and stretch to develop our potential.

Hey, a C is not so bad, we think. I'm doing okay. Maybe so, but you have more in you. Don't take the easy way out. Keep growing. Keep learning. Stir up the gifts inside. Put a demand on your potential. That's the only way it will be released.

When I was growing up, our next-door neighbors kept a big German shepherd in their backyard. Even though their yard was fenced off, they usually kept him on a leash. One day when I was about eight or nine years old, I was in my backyard, playing baseball with some friends, and the ball went over into their yard. I didn't think much about it. I'd been over there plenty of times. Never had a problem.

So I climbed a small ladder over the six-foot fence. On the other side, I picked up the ball. Then I saw their hundred-pound German shepherd across the yard. He spotted me, too, and he came charging toward me at ninety miles per hour.

For some reason, he was not on the leash that day. When I realized that, my heart sank. I thought I was good as dead. I turned and took off running toward the fence as fast as I could.

When I got there, all in one motion, I grabbed the top of the fence with one hand and I jumped as high as I could. Somehow I made it over that fence. I was just a little boy, but I practically jumped over a six-foot fence.

After that, I never believed that "White men can't jump." I jumped that day. I promise you, I jumped!

That big ol' German shepherd helped me discover jumping potential I never knew I had. I had never jumped that high before. Fact is, I have never jumped that high since. But I'm glad to know at least it's in me.

That's what happens when you put a demand on your potential. It comes out. You'll be amazed at what you can do when you put yourself in situations where you need to give something all you've got.

I heard recently about another situation like that. A guy was walking home late at night and decided to take a shortcut through the cemetery. It was dark, of course, and he stumbled and fell down into a great big hole dug earlier that day.

He tried and tried to get out, but it was too deep. He kicked and screamed and hollered and called for people but with no success. After about two hours he finally gave up. He sat down on the side to wait for morning.

Well, a few hours later an old drunk man came stumbling along, and, sure enough, he fell into the same hole. He didn't see the man sitting over there already because he stayed quiet. The first guy watched as the drunken man screamed, hollered, kicked, and carried on just as he had when he first fell in.

The drunk tried to grab the side, kept falling back down, again and again, with no success. Finally, the first guy decided to have some fun with the drunk.

"You'll never get out of here," he said in a deep, scary voice.

But you know what's interesting? He did!

Once again, you can do a whole lot more when you put serious demand on your potential! I want you to have a new boldness today, a new confidence. You are full of possibility. Don't you dare sit around thinking about what you can't do.

"I could never find a new career."

"I could never own my own business."

"I could never get over that fence like Joel did."

I bet you could if you saw that huge dog chasing you! When I had to jump that fence to save my skin, I did it. If you develop that same sense of urgency, you will discover untapped potential too. God is trying to plant new seeds in your heart today. You've got to enlarge your vision. Believe that you do have what it takes. I pray every day, *"God, stretch me. Give me new opportunities. Help me to grow."* When they come, I do my best to take that step of faith.

It's easy to get comfortable. It's easy to settle where we are and just think, Hey, I'm doing as well as anybody I know. But you're not competing against them. You are trying to be the best you can be. You know when you're stretching. You know when you're pushing yourself.

Don't wait for the dog to come chasing you before you try to jump higher than ever before. Stir up your gifts on the inside. God is saying, "I will take you somewhere that you've never been before. I will open new opportunities. I will give you new ways to increase. Are you prepared?"

"Well," you say, "Joel, I'm not that talented. I can only go so far."

Who told you that? The Creator of the universe says you have everything you need to succeed. Almighty God has deposited a part of Himself into you.

"Well, I tried once and failed. It didn't work out."

Try again. It's still in you. You can overcome every obstacle. You can fulfill every dream. You are anointed. You are equipped. You are empowered. This is your season to reach new heights. I believe God is about to release the hidden treasure buried in you. He will grant you new opportunities to draw out your potential.

The Scripture says that it's not by our might, not by our power. One translation says, "It's by the breath of Almighty God." That simply means God will breathe in your direction. You take that step of faith and do what you know God's put in your heart, and He'll breathe favor, He'll breathe wisdom, He'll breathe ability.

God is about to launch you into a new dimension. Potential will be released in you that you never even knew you had. You have not passed this way before. But you've got to do your part. When these opportunities arise, you can't shrink back and think, Ah, I can't do this. This is too much for me. No, it may be too much for you, but it's not too much for our God. Dare to believe.

And you can't let people talk you out of what you feel on the inside. One of the best things I've ever learned is that other people don't have to believe in my dream for it to

come to pass. Not everyone will agree with you. There will always be naysayers. Just tell them, "I'm a child of the Most High God. I'm filled with seeds of greatness. And I know God would not have given me this opportunity if He had not already equipped and empowered me, so I'm headed into uncharted territories. I'm going where I haven't been before."

DeWitt Wallace had a desire to start a magazine. His dream was to have a pocket-size publication full of inspirational stories that people could carry around with them and read throughout the week. But everybody told him his magazine wouldn't work. "People don't want inspiration," critics said. "They want news. They want entertainment."

They told him a pocket-size magazine would never sell. He was in uncharted territories. Even the famous publisher William Randolph Hearst tried to discourage Wallace. But he just politely plugged his ears full of cotton and published his magazine anyway. He'd collected thousands of stories. He was prepared. He first printed just a few hundred copies. It grew to a few thousand, then more and more and more.

Today, Reader's Digest has more than 15 million readers, and DeWitt Wallace remains one of the greatest success stories of American publishing history. He didn't let people talk him out of his dream. He came into agreement with himself, and he saw God do more than he could even ask or think.

We've all had our failures. I've hit obstacles. I'm sure you have too. But you've got to get back up and go again. It's not over until God says it's over. You still have the

potential on the inside.

One night, I was watching a great NFL playoff game. The lead was going back and forth. In the second half, the field-goal kicker for the New York Giants twice had an opportunity to win the game. The distance was within his range. But both times he missed. It's a big deal to miss once in professional football, but in a playoff game to miss twice in one half is really something else. His coach was beside himself.

Then the game went into overtime. The Giants got the ball back. They were marching down the field, trying to score a touchdown. The first team to score wins in overtime, but once again the Giants were stopped before they could score a touchdown.

It was fourth down and the coach had to make a decision. Would he allow his kicker to try another field goal? This one would be farther than the two he had already missed. Or would the coach play it safe and punt the ball away?

The cameras showed the coach deliberating what to do on the sideline. He only had about twenty or thirty seconds to make a decision. He looked up and down the sideline to see what the kicker thought. He couldn't find him anywhere.

Finally, he looked on the field. The kicker was already lined up in position, ready to kick the field goal. When the coach saw his kicker's confidence and determination, he gave him the go-ahead to attempt the field goal. This time, even though it was farther, the kicker put it straight through the uprights and won the game for the Giants!

You may have fallen short of your goal a couple of times in life, maybe a few hundred times. We all have. But my question to you is, *Are you running back onto the field? Do you still know, like the Giants kicker, that you've got it on the inside?* Don't let your mistakes, your disappointments, life's failures keep you from pressing forward. The potential is still in you. You're well able to do what God's called you to do.

My prayer for you is that before you leave this earth, all of your potential will be released. Not one dream, not one gift, not one promise, not one God-given desire will go left unfulfilled.

I'm calling back those seeds you've let go, those family members whom you've given up on, those dreams you pushed aside; I'm calling them all back.

You don't realize it, but you can't die yet. You have too much left in you. You have too much potential. God will not allow your gifts to be wasted. You might as well put up that rocking chair. It's not time to retire, it's time to re-fire.

Get ready. God will give you new opportunities and more time to share your gifts with the world. I read about a ninety-three-year-old woman who just graduated from college. If she can do it at ninety-three, you and I can do it at twenty, at forty, at sixty, at eighty.

Get your fire back. The moment you quit planning for your future is the moment you quit living. The day you quit being excited about what God has in store is the day you go from living to just breathing. You need to have the right attitude, the right vision for your life.

You are a fully loaded person, totally equipped. If you learn to stretch your faith, and if you refuse to die with the music still in you, here is what will happen: The Master will step in. You will get breaks you didn't deserve. You will overcome obstacles that seemed insurmountable. You will accomplish more than you ever thought possible.

And when you come to the end, you will be able to say, "I've finished my course. I've spent all my potential. I've released all my gifts. I fulfilled my God-given destiny."

CHAPTER 21

Stay Open For Something New

Mary Lee Bendolph grew up picking cotton. She lived in one of the poorest parts of the country. She and her neighbors often struggled to survive. Yet even in the worst of times, Mary Lee and her friends made quilts. They stitched together patches from old pants, shirts, sheets, and towels to keep their loved ones warm.

While they stitched, the quilters sang gospel songs, read the Bible, and prayed for God's blessings. The quilts were a big part of life in their little Alabama town. So Mary Lee and the other quilters were understandably wary when an art collector showed up one day asking about them. He praised their quilts and offered to buy them.

Some of the quilters refused, even though the collector offered hundreds of dollars. Mary Lee was among those who decided to trust him. You see, she was open for something new.

"I always prayed for the Lord to make a better way for me, and He did," she said later.

The art collector bought Mary Lee's quilts and others from the women of Gee's Bend, Alabama. He exhibited and sold them around the world. To the amazement of the quilters, their creations were praised as "works of genius." One New York art critic called their quilts "the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced."

Today, quilts from Gee's Bend sell for thousands and

thousands of dollars each. Mary Lee and her fellow quilters are regarded as great artists. Their experiences show that successful people know how to change with the times. They don't get stuck in a rut doing the same thing, the same way year after year. They're constantly evaluating where they are and what they're doing. They make adjustments so they can improve.

It's time to stretch!

Just because something worked five years ago doesn't mean it will work today. We have to stay open to change. We can't get so set in our ways that we won't try anything new. This is why many people lack enthusiasm. There's no freshness in their lives. Every time an opportunity comes for change, for promotion, for increase, because they're not used to it, they shrink back. They don't realize that is keeping them from climbing to the next level.

In the coming days don't be surprised if God brings new opportunities across your path. You may be offered a position that you feel is over your head. You may have an opportunity to change careers or to go into a different field. Or, if you are single, God may bring somebody new into your life, a divine connection. You will be tempted at first to play it safe and think about all the reasons why you can't make a change. Maybe you've been hurt in the past. You can't get into that new relationship. You are not qualified for that new position. You may be afraid of failing.

But if you are to experience God's best, you must be willing to take a risk. You can't get stuck thinking that it can only happen one way. God likes to do new things.

Remember, God gives us challenges to make us stronger.

Until World War II, Swiss watch manufacturers controlled 90 percent of the global market. They were very good at what they did. They made beautiful, precise watches. No one could compete with them. But in the late 1960s, researchers in Switzerland presented the major manufacturers with a new concept—the electronic quartz watch. This watch did not have to be wound. It had a battery. It was much more precise than most mechanical watches and required less maintenance.

The major Swiss watchmakers did not welcome the innovation. Bound by tradition, the watchmakers, of all people, did not accept that times change. The creators of the quartz watch were not discouraged. They took their innovations to the International Watch Fair. There, two Asian manufacturers from outside the watch industry saw the potential of the new quartz design. They jumped on the quartz concept and moved quickly to corner the market. Soon they were selling more watches than any other manufacturers in the world.

The Swiss watchmakers were down but not out. They learned their lesson. They went for a change. They formed a national conglomerate. Then they came up with inexpensive, colorful Swatch watches that helped them get back in the game.

We have to stay open to new ideas. When something new comes across your path, don't be closed-minded. Don't just rule it out and say, "That's not for me." Be open for new opportunities.

God wants us to stay fresh.

We are not supposed to live off of past victories. Some people are always talking about "the good old days." That's fine; I've had a lot of good old days. I hope you have too. But can I tell you something? God has some good new days for you too.

Your greatest victories are not behind you. They are still out in front of you.

I want to light a new fire on the inside of you. You may have lost your passion. You may have gone through disappointments. Things might not have worked out—and now you're in that rut, just doing the same thing, the same way. But this is a new day. God is getting you prepared for new things He's about to do. When those opportunities come across your path, don't you dare think, I can't do this. I don't have those skills. This is not what I'm used to. I'm too old.

No, shake off all of that and say, "I am well able. I am equipped. I am anointed. I am empowered. I'm going to step into a new level of my destiny."

There was once this professional thief. He was incredibly talented. He was one of the most brilliant people I had ever heard about. Not that I'm considering a new line of work, but the way he planned his burglaries was fascinating. He burglarized homes for twenty-one years without getting caught. He never hurt anyone. He only broke in during the day if no one was home. The police were so frustrated. They had figured out his pattern, and they knew, generally, where he would hit, but he always

outsmarted them. They brought in federal agents and some of the most brilliant detectives around. But still, year after year, he continued to elude them.

Then, because of a fluke, he was caught after twenty-one years. I saw an interview with him. He looked like a typical middle-class businessman. He did not look like a thief. An interviewer asked him, "With all of your skills and expertise, why did you choose a life of crime?"

I'll never forget the way he answered. "This is all that I know how to do," he said. The thief told how he was raised in a dysfunctional family. He didn't have anyone really giving him guidance. As I watched his interview, I thought, How limited we become in our thinking. We get so one-dimensional.

I wanted to say to the thief, "If you could steal successfully for twenty-one years, outsmarting some of the brightest minds around, don't you think you could run your own business? Don't you think you could do something equally as successful, being productive with your life?"

Use the same skills, but change your approach.

I worry about such limited thinking. I see it often. A young man came to me after a service and told me that selling drugs was all he knew how to do. He came from a very rough neighborhood. "Joel, I don't like what I do, but I don't have any other skills," he said. "I've never been to college. This is the only way I know how to make a living."

I said, "Listen, if you can sell drugs, don't sell yourself short. You're a lot smarter than you think. That's not the only thing you can do. Think about it like this: If you can

sell drugs, you have to know how to market your product; that's marketing. You have to know how to get the word out; that's advertising. You have to take care of your clients; that's customer service. You have to know when to sell and when not to sell; that's a management decision. Don't fool yourself. If you can sell drugs, you can sell medical equipment. You can sell electronics. You can sell stocks and bonds."

Reinvent yourself; get a new vision of your life.

Maybe nobody has ever spoken into you. But let me tell you, you have a gift. You have something to offer. Don't use your God-given talents for the wrong purposes. Don't get stuck with the mind-set that This is all I know how to do for the rest of my life. Put yourself in the right environment. Then you'll see God begin to open up new doors. It's not too late. You're not too old. You haven't made too many mistakes. You wouldn't be here if God didn't have more for you to accomplish. Keep looking for new opportunities. Be willing to get out of your comfort zone.

Sometimes you just need some freshness in your life. Stretch yourself. Stir up what God has put on the inside. If you don't have a dream, you're not really living. You're only existing. You have to have a reason to get out of bed each morning, something that motivates you, something that you're passionate about. Maybe at one time you had a dream, but you went through some disappointments. But here's a key: When one dream dies, dream another dream. Just because it didn't work out the way you had it planned doesn't mean God doesn't have another plan.

You cannot allow one disappointment or even a series of

disappointments to convince you that your dream never will happen. Thomas Edison was described as "unteachable" early in his schooling. Later, as a scientist and inventor, he had one failure after another in his efforts to develop an incandescent electric light bulb.

Still, Edison did not despair. He kept dreaming another dream.

"I have not failed," he said. "I have just found ten thousand ways that won't work."

We all know that Edison eventually turned on the lights. You will, too, if you stay in faith and stay open to change. You may have tried and failed, but understand this: A failure is not a denial, it's just a delay.

Today we take iPhones, iTunes, and iPods for granted because they are so common. We forget that Steve Jobs had his setbacks too. He started his first business in his parents' garage at the age of twenty. Within ten years, Apple was a \$2 billion company. But then, his own board of directors fired Jobs from his own business!

Did he become a victim? No. He said that getting fired from Apple was the greatest thing that ever happened to him! Today, it would be hard to disagree with that. After Jobs built up two more successful companies and sold them for billions, Apple realized its mistake. They brought Jobs back. He restored Apple as one of most successful companies in the world.

God's way is the high way.

Negative thoughts will come: It's over. You're too old. You

blew it. You had your chance. These thoughts will try to convince us to give up on what God has placed in our hearts. But you must dig in your heels and say, "Thanks, but no thanks. It may not have worked out my way, but I know God has another way. I will not sit around and live my life defeated. I will rise up and dream a new dream."

This is what Joshua had to do. He stayed open to things happening a different way. After Moses died, Joshua was chosen to lead the people of Israel. They were headed toward the Promised Land. They came to the Jordan River. They needed to get across, but there was no bridge.

Joshua remembered that his predecessor, Moses, had held up his rod and parted the Red Sea. I'm sure he thought God would tell him to do it the same way. I can even imagine Joshua climbs to the top of the hill, holds up his rod, and says, "God, please part this river." He's praying. He's hoping. He's believing.

This is the first real test of his leadership. Everyone is watching closely, thinking, Let's see if he has what Moses had. Let's see what Joshua is made of.

He holds up the rod. But wouldn't you know it? Nothing happened. The waters didn't budge. He easily could have thought, I must not be the right one. It worked for Moses, but it didn't work for me.

No. Joshua understood this principle. He stayed open for something new. God told him to tell the priests to start marching toward the waters. And the moment their feet touched the waters, the river would part.

The priests walked to the water. The closer they came, the

more people tried to talk them out of it. "You'd better not keep going. You better not listen to Joshua. You will surely drown."

It didn't faze them. They just kept walking, doing as God said. And sure enough, as soon as their feet touched the water, the river began to pull back. People were able to go through on dry ground, just like they'd done with Moses.

What am I saying? God chose to do it a different way with Joshua than He did with Moses. Had Joshua been set in his ways and closed-minded, he would have missed out on God's best. But Joshua's attitude was: If it didn't work one way, I will not be defeated and give up. I know God has another way. So I will keep trying. I will keep believing. I will keep pressing forward until I find that right way.

Could it be that you've been too set in your ways, and because you've given up after the first time, or the second time, or the fifth time, you've missed out on seeing your waters part? I've found you have to face some closed doors before you'll ever come to your open doors.

Don't get discouraged, give up, or settle just because it didn't happen one way. Keep knocking. Keep believing. Keep hoping. Keep dreaming. You may hear ten people tell you no before you come to that one yes. But that one yes will make up for all the other noes. You may have a dozen things that you've tried that didn't work out, but if you'll stay in faith, you'll come to that one thing that does work out.

It's like this little boy I heard about. He was five or six years old. He had a baseball and a bat. He looked at that bat and said to himself, "I am the best hitter in all the

world." He threw the ball up, took a swing, and missed. He picked the ball up and said it more determinedly, "I am the best hitter in all the world." He threw it up and swung. Strike two. Missed again.

He picked the ball up. This time he straightened his hat. He said it with even more intensity, "I am the best hitter in all the world." He threw the ball up, concentrated the best he could, took a swing, and he missed. Strike three.

He simply laid his bat down, picked the ball up, and said, "What do you know? I am the best pitcher in all the world."

If you are to be successful, you must remain open to new ideas. Be willing to reinvent yourself. The Scripture says that God's ways are not our ways. They are higher and better than our ways. That tells me God's dream for your life is so much bigger, so much greater than your own.

When a door closes, something doesn't work out, don't sit around in self-pity thinking, Poor old me. No, we may have a reason to feel sorry for ourselves, but we don't have a right. God is still on the throne. He still has a plan. You would not be alive if God didn't have something great in your future.

God knew every disappointment we would go through. He knew every closed door, every person who would do you wrong. None of that is a surprise to God. The good news is, God has it all figured out. He had the solution before you even had the problem. If something didn't work out the way you had it planned, let it go and get ready for the new thing God is about to do.

Mary McLeod Bethune was the youngest of seventeen children. She was born in South Carolina back in the late 1800s to slaves. In spite of all the odds, she got a good education and even went to college. From the time she was a little girl, she had a desire to go to Africa one day and teach children. She had this dream year after year. She just knew that one day she would be teaching those students. As she neared graduation from college, she sent her application in to a well-known missionary organization. She was a straight-A student with an impeccable reputation. You couldn't meet a finer young woman. Week after week, she was waiting, hoping, praying, believing that she would get accepted. But one day came the news she didn't want to hear. For some reason she had been turned down. She was devastated. She said it felt as if something died inside her that day.

Working with children in Africa was what Mary Bethune wanted to do with her life. But remember, when one door closes, if you will stay in faith, God will open up another door. Instead of sitting around thinking about how bad life had treated her and what didn't work out, she put on a new attitude.

"If I can't teach the students over there, then I'll teach the students here," she said. Mary Bethune decided to open her own school. She had no money, no building, and no equipment, but where there's a will, there's a way. She found cardboard boxes and used them as desks. She strained red berries so her students could use the juice as ink in their pens. She and her students raised money for their books every week by hauling thousands of pounds of garbage down to the local dump.

Several years went by. A college nearby noticed what was

going on and asked Mary's school to join forces. The two schools became Bethune-Cookman College, which is now known as Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida. Mary Bethune went on to become the first African American woman to be a college president. In 1932, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed her as an advisor to his cabinet, making her the first African American woman to serve as a presidential advisor.

Dream a new dream.

If things don't work out the way you had hoped, don't sit around all defeated. Dream a new dream. God is still in control. He would not have allowed the door to close unless He had something better in store. Life may not be fair, but know this: God is fair. Nothing you've been through has to keep you from your destiny. If you didn't get the job you wanted, apply for another job. If you can't teach the students overseas, teach the students here. Put on a new attitude. God has you in the palm of His hand. He has already planned out your days for good. He holds victory in your future.

Ask yourself if you are really living today. Or are you just existing? You must stir up the dreams that have been pressed down. The Scripture says in Isaiah 60:1: "Arise, shine; for your light has come." It doesn't say that your light "will come." It says your light "has come." If you knew the great things God had in your future, you wouldn't go around discouraged and negative. You would go out each day with a smile on your face and a spring in your step.

I think about my father. As a young man he sold popcorn in the Isis Theatre in Fort Worth, Texas. He was raised in

extreme poverty. At the age of seventeen my father gave his life to the Lord. God called him to preach. He ministered in the prisons, the rest homes, on the streets, anywhere he could find. My dad was married at an early age. But unfortunately that marriage didn't work out. His dreams were shattered. He left the ministry and didn't think that he would ever preach again.

For several years he went into the insurance business. He was very good. He excelled at what he did. But down deep inside he knew the call of God was still on his life. He didn't feel worthy. He didn't feel like he deserved it. Everyone around him was telling him, "You're washed up. You'll never be in ministry again. You'll never have a family." It's funny. Sometimes when we're down, people try to keep us down. But this is what I love about God: He lifts the fallen. He gives hope to the hopeless. His mercy is bigger than any mistake we could ever make.

I don't believe that divorce is God's best. But unfortunately sometimes it happens. I'm not for divorce, but I am for divorced people. Your life does not have to stop just because a relationship came to an end. God still has a plan. Arise and shine. That means get up from that discouragement. Shake off that self-pity. Receive mercy for your mistakes.

Arise—that's the first thing. And then number two, you must shine. Put a smile on your face. Get your enthusiasm back. Laugh again. Enjoy your life. Take up new hobbies. Find some new friends. Buy some new clothes. It's not enough to just arise. Shine! That is an act of your faith. When you shine, you're announcing not only to yourself, not only to your friends, but you're saying to the enemy: "I will not live my life in regrets. I will not beat myself up

over the mistakes I've made. I know God has another plan, so I will arise and shine."

What you're really saying is, "I'm back and I'm bad." But in a good way!

My father had all these thoughts telling him, You'll never be in ministry. You'll never have a family again. But God is a God of restoration. He will take what was meant for your harm and use it to your advantage. Several years later my father left the insurance business and returned to the ministry. Things began to flourish. One day he met my mother. They fell in love and married. God blessed them with five children.

I often think that we wouldn't be here today if my father had not stayed open to a plan different from his. Had he not been willing to dream a new dream, he never would have met my mother. I probably never would have been born. There may not have been a Lakewood Church.

In life there will always be voices telling us, "You blew it. You had your chance. It's over. Just settle where you are."

Don't believe those lies. If you get knocked down, get back up again. It's not over until God says it's over. My father went from being a popcorn salesman to a minister to an insurance salesman, and then back to being a minister. That tells me God knows how to connect the dots.

God knows how to get you to your final destination.

Some of you today, you may have been through a disappointment or something didn't work out. Maybe it was even your fault. But God is saying, "I still have a plan.

Dream a new dream." Get your fire back. Get your enthusiasm back. Just because it didn't happen one way doesn't mean it's over. When life deals you a lemon, God can make lemonade. He can take your mess and turn it into your message. It's time to arise and shine.

In the early 1900s, farmers across the South were facing a major challenge. A tiny little insect called the boll weevil had migrated from South America and was quickly destroying their crops. They tried everything they could do to get rid of it. They exterminated with all kinds of pesticides. They even came up with new formulas they had never used before, still to no avail. Eventually, all they could do was sit back and watch their crops and their livelihood be eaten away. They were so discouraged. It looked like it was over.

But then, as farmers were feeling defeated and down, scientist George Washington Carver came up with an idea. He said, "Instead of planting our normal cotton crops that we know won't survive, why don't we try something new. Let's plant peanuts."

They looked at him like a cow at a new gate.

"Peanuts?" they said. "We could never make a living off of peanuts."

But Carver, a botanist, eventually talked them into it. He explained that peanut oil was used in hundreds of products: everything from cosmetics to paints, plastics to nitroglycerin.

Better yet, he had discovered that boll weevils did not like

the taste of peanuts. The first peanut crops took off and flourished like nothing they had ever seen before. The farmers made more money in several months than they normally made in a whole year. In fact, even when the boll weevils left, the farmers didn't go back to their cotton crops. They stuck with peanuts, producing more than any country in the world.

God has a plan. You may have some boll weevils bothering you right now, but don't worry. There are some peanuts in your future. What you may think is a setback is really a setup for a greater comeback.

I love the fact that the boll weevils did not like the taste of peanuts. That tells me God always has something in my future that the enemy cannot touch. He always has some way to prosper us, some way to heal us, some way to restore us, some way to bring our dreams to pass. Even when it looks difficult, even when things don't work out, just remind yourself: "These boll weevils may be causing me some problems. They may not even go away. But really, I'm not worried about it. I know they can't touch my harvest. God has given them a distaste for what belongs to me."

So think of this: That person at the office who always gets on your nerves and annoys you; next time you see him, just think to yourself: He's just a boll weevil. He can't touch my harvest!

This shows us how God's plan is better than our plan. Had it not been for the boll weevils, the farmers never would have tried peanuts. They would have just kept producing their usual crops over and over, all the while missing out on the abundance that should have been theirs.

When you face an adversity, that setback, that disappointment, you don't know where it's taking you. You've heard the saying, "When you're down to nothing, God is up to something." When it looks like your crops are being eaten up, God is not on the throne saying, "Oh, man. What will I do? Who let the boll weevils out?"

No, God is in complete control. He has a way even when we don't see a way. Here's the key: Had those farmers not been open for something new and been willing to reinvent themselves, they could still be sitting around saying, "Just my luck. Too bad for me. A little insect ruined my future."

Nothing has to destroy your future. When one dream dies, dream another dream. Try something else. If you hold your rod up and the rivers don't part, walk to the waters. God has another plan. Be willing to get out of your comfort zone. Keep a freshness in your life. Don't be satisfied living off past victories. God has new victories out in front of you.

You may have been through some disappointments, but it's time to arise and shine. It's time to dream a new dream. It's time to believe again. If you'll put on this new attitude and stay open to new opportunities, God will lead you to the peanuts when the boll weevils show up.

If one job application gets turned down, God will give you a better job. Or, like my father, when it looks like your darkest hour, God will turn it around, restore you, and bring you out to your brightest hour!

CHAPTER 22

Finding Your Place Of Blessing

My friend Reuben is a mechanic with his own auto repair business. For years his shop was on a little side street in an out-of-the-way industrial area. He built up a loyal clientele, but it was a struggle. Some weeks he could barely pay the bills.

Then one day, Reuben was driving on the freeway in Houston when he saw a For Lease sign on a big building only a block off that major road. Something clicked. He copied the phone number on the sign and called it that afternoon. The commercial real estate agent told him the building was still available.

Reuben went back with the real estate agent and inspected the vacant building, inside and out. Then he went home and prayed for God's guidance. Afterward, he felt a sense of peace, as if buying that building was part of God's plan.

So Reuben made the move to the new location. It was less than a mile from his old place, but the next year, his business increased ten times over!

What made the difference? Reuben moved to his place of blessing.

Could you be in the wrong place at the right time? Could it be that, like Reuben, you are just a little short from where you need to be to become all you can become?

I'm not talking just about locations for business or living. Maybe you are situated in the wrong relationship, or maybe you are the right state of the country, but the wrong state of mind due to stress or anger. Maybe you need to hang up a hangout that is not your true place of blessing?

It's time to stretch!

If you are not growing, if you feel unfulfilled, unsettled, and out of place, it could be that you need to move on to a better place. There is a place God has designed where opportunities find you, a place where His blessings overtake you.

God created places before He created people.

God created the oceans, and then He created fish and other marine life to swim in His waters. He created land, and then He populated the planet with man and animals. Location, location, location is not just a Realtor's slogan. God has always been careful about matching His creatures to the places where they will flourish. He didn't put polar bears in the Mojave Desert. He didn't place sharks and sea rays in the Rocky Mountains.

In the same way, God has a particular place for each one of us, a place where each of us will find our highest purpose, where we will thrive and reflect God's greatness. He has a specific job for you, in a specific community, where you are surrounded by specific people positioned to help you find fulfillment.

Your location is extremely important. God will not bless

you just anywhere. He will bless you when you are where you're supposed to be physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. I encourage you to find that place. Don't settle for anything less than the best God has to give you.

You can tell your place of blessing by how it feels to you. Your senses and your spirit will tell you: This is where I am supposed to be. It's like the game Victoria and I played with our children when they were younger. We would hide favorite toys, books, or candy around the house and ask Alexandra and Jonathan to find them. When they moved in the direction of the "hidden treasure," we would tell them they were getting warmer and warmer until they'd be right there, when we'd say "You're red hot!" If they went in the wrong direction, away from the hidden goodies, we'd say, "You're getting colder. Now you're freezing cold!"

I would encourage you to always move toward the places that warm your spirit, and move away from those that leave you cold. Move to the place that feels right to you, and await God's blessing there.

Look for your place of blessing.

You may feel that as long as you stay in faith, God will bless you wherever you go. And in a sense, that's true. But God has a specific place where He's commanded you to be blessed. And I would hate to think that I lived my life just a mile away from my real place of blessing.

God may open up doors, but you could miss them if you are in the wrong spot, hanging out with the wrong friends, in the wrong frame of mind. When you're in the center of God's perfect will, you will feel a sense of peace.

Your days will no longer be filled with struggle. Sure, you'll have some challenges and maybe even some tough times to push through. But overall, you should enjoy your life. You should feel a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. When you rest your head on the pillow each night, you should feel at peace, knowing that you are in God's perfect will.

In the Old Testament, the children of Israel followed the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Sometimes the cloud remained at the same location for two or three months. They camped there until signs changed. Sometimes, the cloud would move every day for a week. So when they rose each morning, the first thing they had to do was to check the cloud.

I'm sure there were times when they wanted to move because they didn't like the location or they were surrounded by enemies. But the cloud stayed, so they stayed. At other times, I can imagine they'd awoken to see the cloud moving and think, We just set up camp. We like this place. We're comfortable. Let's stay here.

Yet they understood their blessing was connected to being at the right place. They knew they wouldn't have the food, the supplies, the protection they needed unless they followed the cloud. They had to do their part and reach their place of blessing so they could enjoy God's favor.

If you miss the signs, whether clouds or pillars of fire, or just a nagging feeling deep inside, you could become trapped in a bad place. Negative environments will keep you from going and growing. Some are infested with temptations, distractions, or bad attitudes. Do you need to move onward and upward? Life is too short to waste time

in the wrong place, blocked from God's full blessing.

Follow the signs to your best place.

Some longtime friends of ours were still in their twenties when they followed God's guidance and moved to Montgomery, Alabama. With no experience in broadcasting, this young faith-filled couple worked to build the state's first full-power Christian television station.

It was no easy task. With little money, they had to scavenge for old equipment tossed out on the curb by other television stations. Often they worked without air-conditioning and did repairs and painting themselves to save money. Still, over five years they built up a successful television ministry. They were happy and fulfilled in their work.

Then about six years later, they saw the signs from God calling them to a new location and a greater blessing. They were called to sell their Montgomery station and move to a bigger market. It didn't seem to make sense to leave an established station with nothing lined up. They had no station, no contacts, no financing waiting for them in the bigger city. All they had was their faith. They stepped out not knowing what lay ahead.

Then, out of the blue things began to fall into place. Through a series of unusual events, they ended up with an independent station. Within seven years they had not just one station but an entire network.

Our friends followed the signs and reaped the rewards. Their place of blessing moved. Had they not been

sensitive, had they been stuck in a rut, they would have missed out on God's best. God has a place of victory in store for every one of us, but it's up to us to find that place.

Find God's sweet spot for you.

My father used to say, "Learn to stay in your sweet spot." In baseball and golf, the sweet spot is the place on the bat or the golf club that gives you the most power when you hit the ball. My father applied it to a higher level. He was urging me to find the position in life designed for me by God. It too is the most powerful place, the location where you can most benefit from God's blessings in your life.

When you find your sweet spot, your place of blessing, you feel a deep sense of purpose and fulfillment. Search your heart and be sensitive to where it might be. It's not about financial rewards or material things, though they may come with the package. It's about receiving His full blessing.

You may be chasing a job, a relationship, or an opportunity. I encourage you to always seek to better your life but remember to stay in balance. There's more to life than money. A job relocation may include more money or benefits, but if the environment is not good, if you travel all the time and neglect your family, if you're surrounded by negative people, that may not be God's best place for you. Pay attention to your feelings. If you are unfulfilled, restless, and unsettled, the signs may be pointing to another location.

One of our church members, Hugh, just passed up a huge promotion from his employer. His company wanted him

to move to another city. He prayed about it and didn't feel at peace with the offer. He didn't want to leave the church or his friends in Houston.

When Hugh turned down the promotion, his associates could not understand his decision. They thought he would jump at the opportunity for more money and a more powerful, prestigious position. But Hugh told me that deep down inside, he could not find comfort in moving away.

"Joel, do you think I'm making a mistake?" he asked.

I told Hugh that no matter how good the offer, if you don't have peace about it, it's not right for you. When I said that, a burden seemed to lift from his shoulders. He seemed so relieved. He accepted that he'd read the signs correctly. He felt at peace in his sweet spot.

I met a wonderful couple with several children from Botswana, Africa. They lived in a little hut with no air-conditioning, no running water. It was hot. It was dirty.

There was no television, no grocery store or hospital. Yet every time I talked with this couple, they were as happy as can be. I asked them if their lives were difficult. They looked at me in confusion and said, "Joel, we were wondering the same thing about you. How do you stay there in Houston with all that traffic and noise?" They told me that they were blessed and fulfilled right where they were—in their place of blessing.

You may be able to make more money somewhere else. Something may look more attractive to you. But when you're in God's perfect will, there is a peace and a

fulfillment that money cannot buy.

Are your blessings awaiting delivery?

In the first book of Kings 17:2, God told Elijah to leave the place where he was and go east, down to the Kerith brook, saying, "For I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."

God commanded that Elijah's needs were to be supplied. But it was up to Elijah to reach the designated location. He had to be obedient. He could have said, "God, I'm comfortable where I am. I don't want to go down there."

If he'd done that, though, Elijah would have missed out. The ravens would have taken his provision down to the brook. God would have supplied his needs, but Elijah would not have been where he was supposed to be to receive the food.

How many of us have our blessings, our provision, ready for delivery, but we're not in position to receive them? We didn't follow the still, small voice speaking to us. Maybe you are hanging around friends who are keeping you from receiving your blessings. You are not where you need to be.

Perhaps God opened up an opportunity, but you were not in position to receive it. You knew, deep inside, you should take it. But you were afraid to step forward or simply were not where you needed to be at the time.

You need to put yourself in position to receive those blessings. I can't stand to think that God could be delivering favor, blessings, ideas, and creativity that I'm

missing because I'm not where I'm supposed to be.

Your blessings might be the opportunity to serve others. If you ignore that opportunity, if you run from where God wants you to be, you may be missing out on His greatest gift. Maybe God's been dealing with you again and again about taking care of elderly neighbors or serving in the children's ministry, mentoring a young person. Deep inside, you know you should be doing it, but you just keep putting it off.

Be aware that God may be seeking to bless you in ways you never thought possible, ways beyond your comprehension. Service to others could open opportunities beyond your dreams. You could meet someone who will change your life for the better. God has a specific place where He's commanded you to be blessed. Don't just haphazardly apply for a job or move from one place to another.

"Oh, it looks pretty good. I think I'll take this promotion even though it doesn't feel quite right."

"I'll hang out with these people even though they seem a little sketchy"

You've got to be more focused than that. You won't be blessed just anywhere. You will be blessed when you reach the place God intended you to be.

Samuel and his wife Shari always wanted to start their own business, but they'd never done it because Samuel was making a good salary as a manager for a big company where he'd worked many years. He'd often talked to me about his desire to break out and start his own business,

but he kept putting it off. He was afraid he might fail, afraid he didn't have what it would take.

Then one day Samuel heard me talking about listening to that "inner voice," stretching beyond the comfort zone, and taking calculated risks. He wrote me a letter and said I'd relit the fire that he'd allowed to die.

Samuel resigned from the big company, and Shari quit her job too. They pulled out all of their retirement money and invested in their own consulting business. They put themselves in position to receive God's greatest blessing.

Little by little, their business grew. God's favor increased. Samuel's former bosses had tried to talk him out of leaving. They said his new business would never make it. But they became his biggest clients. He tripled his income after a couple of years. He and Shari have already built up more retirement money than they'd invested into their start up. They said, "Joel, we never dreamed we would see God's favor in the way we've seen it."

They found their place of blessing. They arrived at the brook where God commanded them to be blessed. Samuel and Shari told me that they struggled for a time, but because they knew they would reap the full rewards of their efforts, they were glad to keep working hard. God supernaturally put all the pieces into place for their benefit.

When you follow your instincts and pursue the life that fulfills you, you will never go wrong. Certainly, you have to be wise. Don't put your family's welfare at risk on a whim. Prepare yourself. Take care of your dependents. Act responsibly. But when you feel good about making the

move, pray for God's guidance, look for His signs, and dare to take that step of faith. You don't want to reach the end of your life only to wonder what might have happened if you'd been willing to stretch yourself and reach for your dreams.

Elijah reached the brook. He was obedient, and God blessed him and met all of his needs. But one day, the brook dried up. The water quit flowing. The ravens quit coming. And so God told him, "Elijah, I want you to go to the city of Zarephath, for I have commanded a widow to take care of you."

Notice once again God designated a specific place where Elijah's needs would be met. The key was that Elijah had to keep following the signs, getting to that place of blessing. Sometimes a brook will dry up. Sometimes God will push you into a new area. You have to be alert and willing to follow His directions.

When Elijah went to the brook, he was hiding from an enemy. Somebody had been chasing him. The enemy was from the city of Zarephath—exactly where God told him to go. Think about it: God could have sent Elijah anywhere, but He sent him to his enemy's hometown!

Sometimes God leads us to places that don't make sense to us. He has us leave a "safe" job to start a new, more fulfilling career. He breaks up a "comfortable" relationship and guides us to someone more loving, more caring, and more loyal.

Sometimes, you will not understand God's plan for you. Remind yourself at those times that God may be steering you to your place of blessing.

For seventeen years, my brother Paul worked as a surgeon in Little Rock, but after attending our father's funeral and memorial service, Paul heard that still, small voice telling him to come back to Houston to help pastor our father's church.

Paul was reluctant to uproot his family and leave the medical practice he'd built in Little Rock. Yet he knew deep inside that he was supposed to come back home. And so he returned to Houston. Our church would not be what it is today if my brother had not taken that huge step of faith.

Today, the blessings are clear to Paul. After all, he gets to work with me every day! Seriously, he has found even greater fulfillment here because he's been able to serve even more people in his medical missionary work. I'm sure Paul would have been happy had he remained in Little Rock, but I don't believe he would have experienced the joy and the fulfillment he's found here in his place of blessing.

It's important to listen to those inner thoughts that serve to guide us in our careers, our relationships, and in our faith too. I've known families that stayed with one church for generations to honor tradition, even when they were not well served. You should not sit in church week after week if you are being condemned, told you're a weak worm of the dust, filled with doubt and disbelief.

Your place of worship should inspire you to rise higher. Find a place where you are challenged to become all God created you to be—a church where the leaders speak life and victory into you.

In Psalm 133, we're told about the pouring of oil on Aaron's head. He was the priest, the leader, and when he was anointed, the oil flowed from his head, down his beard, to the rest of his body. The flow of the oil symbolized how the anointing goes from the leader down to the people. Your own anointing will reflect that of your spiritual leader. If that leader is controlling, condemning, and arrogant, that's what flows down to you.

I don't know about you, but I don't need that in my life. Locate good leadership. Find a home in a great church with great ministers who have hearts of compassion and integrity.

In the Old Testament, God promised Elisha that he would have a double portion of Elijah's anointing. But God said, "Elisha, it will happen under one condition, not how much you pray, not how many scriptures you can quote. You have to be in the right place. You have to stay close to Elijah."

For years Elisha was faithful. He followed Elijah everywhere he went. In fact, a couple of times Elijah tried to get rid of him, tried to lose him. But Elisha stayed right with him. He was determined.

Elisha's job was to help take care of Elijah, who was an older man. He would take him food and water, assist him in menial things. In the natural, his work appeared to be unimportant. I'm sure some of Elisha's friends said, "Elisha, what are you doing spending your time following this older man around? You've got dreams and desires. You need to go on with your life."

But Elisha knew something they didn't know. He knew how important it was to be in the right place. He knew that at the right time, God would release double the blessings into his life. He knew if he stayed close to Elijah, little by little, that same anointing would flow into him. Sometimes it may be difficult for you, just as it was for Elisha. You think, I'm serving, and nobody appreciates what I do. I work and get nothing in return.

Yet, whether you realize it or not, God's anointing will flow upon you. Elisha was faithful. Because he recognized his destiny and connected to the right place, he received exactly what God promised: a double portion.

When you are in the right place, connected to the right person, that's when God will release great things into your life. Look for the signs in your own life. Be determined to reach the highest place of blessing. Search your heart. Make sure you are obeying. Stay faithful.

Remember, your blessing is connected to being in the right place physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. If you make staying in God's perfect will a priority, God will lead you and guide you. He will pour out His blessings and favor, and you'll live that life of victory He has in store for you.

CHAPTER 23

Believe For A Supernatural Year

A salesman named Jamie knocked on a door in Twin Falls, Idaho, hoping to sell a vacuum cleaner to the couple who lived there. Andi, the woman who answered the door, said they could not afford one because Paul, her husband, was on disability with medical problems.

Paul's kidneys had been failing for more than a year, she explained. He was way down on a list of five hundred people awaiting a transplant. Part of the problem was that Paul had type O-positive blood, so he could get a kidney only from someone with the same blood type. None of their friends or family members was a match.

"I'm O-positive," the salesman said.

"Would you consider being tested to see if you could be a donor for Paul?" Andi asked.

Sensing her concern, Jamie said he'd think about it. He went to his car and prayed. Then he called his father, who is a doctor, and his wife. "I just felt this was something I was called to do," he told them.

A calm feeling came over Jamie. He hadn't even met Paul Sucher yet. He knew nothing about him other than the fact that they shared a blood type and Paul might die if he didn't find a donor.

Jamie knocked on the door again. This time, he wasn't selling. He was giving.

"I'll do whatever I can to help," he said.

Wouldn't you know it? Jamie and Paul were a perfect match. After months of testing and discussions with doctors, Jamie donated a kidney that saved Paul's life. Today, both men are healthy and strong.

Jamie never did sell that vacuum cleaner. But he is okay with that. "I had the opportunity to help someone, and I had to take it," he said.

God knows what you need, and He knows how to get it to you.

Paul Sucher never would have dreamed that a door-to-door salesman might offer to save his life. Who would ever think that God would send a vacuum salesman to donate a kidney?

God has you in the palm of His hand. He knows every need. He knows every struggle. He knows every dream, every desire. The good news is, God has it all figured out. He's a supernatural God.

It's time to stretch!

So often we limit our thinking. We think we'll never overcome our challenges or we'll never accomplish our dreams. We don't have the connections, the talent, or the funds.

But the problem is that we tend to look for answers only in the natural world. We have a limited perspective. We forget that God is a supernatural God. And just because

we don't see a way doesn't mean that God doesn't have a way.

You may be impatient now: "Joel, if something doesn't happen soon, I won't get out of debt until I'm 122 years old."

I understand, but you should never rule out the power of supernatural increase. God can bring one opportunity across your path that will thrust you to a new level. He has explosive blessings that can blast you out of debt and into abundance.

A lady told me recently, "I don't think I'll ever get well. You should see what the medical report says about me."

That may be true according to the report from medical science, I told her. "But I have another report, and it says you will live and not die. God is restoring health unto you."

The question is: "Whose report will you believe?" With men it may be impossible, but with God all things are possible.

You may be planning on an average year, but God has lined up an extraordinary year. You're planning on getting by, but God is planning on abundance. He's planning on overflow.

You're thinking, *If I can just survive*. But God is saying, *"It's time to thrive."*

You've got to get in agreement with God. God has supernatural favor in store for you. He has supernatural

opportunities, supernatural healing, supernatural restoration. God wants to do unusual things in your life. You need to have expectations deep down inside, an excitement in your spirit.

This will not be an average year. It will not be a mediocre year. It will be a supernatural year—a year when you see dreams come to pass, a year when you discover hidden talents, a year when you get stronger and healthier. It will be a year when we look back and say, "Wow! God outdid Himself this year."

When you hear this truth, when God tries to plant a new seed of promise in your heart, there are three words you need to respond with. Don't complicate it. Don't try to figure out all the reasons why it will not happen for you. No, just three simple words: "Lord, I believe."

You may be sick, but God says you will be well. "Lord, I believe."

You may be in debt, but God says, "You're coming out. You're coming into overflow. You will lend and not borrow." "Lord, I believe."

The economy may be down, but God says, "You will see supernatural increase, supernatural promotion, explosive blessings."

You may say, "Well, Joel, I think you've got the wrong message. I don't see how I could be blessed this year."

Zip that up. Get in agreement with God. Let the seed take root. God is saying, "This is your year for far-and-beyond favor. This is your year to see the fulfillment of your

dreams. It's your year for supernatural opportunities."

You may not see how it could happen, but that's okay. God has a thousand different ways to bring your dreams to pass. We think natural. God thinks supernatural. The medical report may not look good, but understand, God is not limited by the laws of medicine. His power supersedes natural laws.

Remember the few loaves and the few fish that fed the multitudes? Remember God multiplying the footsteps of four men to sound like a mighty army? My friend, God can make you seem bigger than you really are. He can make you look more powerful. He knows how to multiply your influence, multiply your strength, multiply your talent, multiply your income.

You don't have to figure all this out. All you have to do is believe. If you will release your faith for a supernatural year—get up each day expecting God's far-and-beyond favor—then you will see God show up and do amazing things in your life.

A friend's church was nearly done with a major building program, but they needed \$2 million to complete the project. The pastor was encouraging the congregation, just challenging them to do their best. In passing he said, "If God were to give you the funds to pay off this project, how many of you would do it?" In other words, there's no pressure. You can't give if you don't have it. But if God were to supernaturally provide, would you make a commitment to give? My friend Stefannie raised her hand when the pastor asked that question. She didn't have the money. But Stefannie said she was willing to give it to the church if somehow it came to her.

Well, several days later, Stefannie's friend Jessica called and told her that she'd been awarded millions from a major lawsuit settlement. She offered to give \$2 million to Stefannie.

Stefannie was so excited. She was overjoyed.

"You are an answer to prayer," she said. "I know exactly what I'll do with those funds. I'm donating it to my church to help finish that project."

A few days later, Jessica called Stefannie again.

"You know, I really feel like I'm supposed to give you two million dollars," she said. "So if you're giving those funds away, then I'm handing you an additional two million dollars for yourself."

It gets better. A few weeks after that, Jessica's attorney notified her that the judge had made another ruling in the same lawsuit.

"The other side has to pay penalties and interest," her lawyer said. "That means you will receive an additional four million dollars!"

My friend, that is far-and-beyond favor. That's God outdoing Himself. When it was all said and done, Stefannie was blessed. The church's building project was paid off. And Jessica didn't lose a penny.

But notice, it all began when Stefannie dared to believe for supernatural increase. When the pastor said, "If God gave it to you, would you give it?" She could have thought,

Aw, I don't need to raise my hand. I never get any good breaks. That will never happen for me.

No, Stefannie was bold. As an act of faith, she said, "Lord, I believe." She was saying in effect, "I believe in supernatural increase. I know my job is not my source. God is my source. He owns it all."

When you put your faith out there, you allow God to show up and do amazing things in your life. My mother has always been a big believer in that. When I was a boy, Mom put it out there that she wanted a swimming pool. She was constantly talking to my father about it. But my dad was totally against having a pool.

"Dodie, swimming pools are too expensive, and they require too much upkeep," he said. "We don't have the time or the money. I'll get you something else but not a swimming pool."

Well, my father might as well have been talking to a tree. That did not faze my mother. She just went around the house saying, "One day we'll have a pool. It will be so fun. I can't wait to get out there in the water."

My dad would look at her like: "Woman, what are you talking about? We are not putting in a swimming pool."

But month after month, even year after year, my mother kept thanking God for His goodness, thanking God that He was lining up the right people, the right opportunities. She was believing for it. My dad was believing against it. But down in her heart she had a confidence, a knowing, that one day she would have that pool.

Every several weeks she would ask my father about it. "John, have you thought any more about our swimming pool?"

"Dodie," he'd say, "I don't have to think any more. I've told you a thousand times we are not putting in a swimming pool." In one ear and out the other.

One day my father saw my mother in the backyard marking things off with a tape measure. He went out and said, "Dodie, what are you doing?"

"I'm just getting an idea where to put our new swimming pool," she said. My father thought, This woman will not give up.

About six months later a couple came to my father's church. They were strangers from another state. After the service they asked to speak to my parents.

"We build swimming pools," the man said. "We own a large company, and we flew all this way just to see if we could give you a swimming pool."

My dad nearly passed out.

My mother took the pool man by the arm and said, "We need to talk."

Needless to say, several months later we had a beautiful swimming pool in the ground, right where my mother had laid it out. I'll never forget the first time we swam in it. The kids, we were all so excited. We ran and jumped in. My mother got in too.

A few minutes later, here comes my father in his swim trunks. His legs were so white they reflected the glory of God. He couldn't wait to jump in, he was so excited. My mother looked at him and said, "John, don't even think about getting in my swimming pool."

What was that? Supernatural favor. God said if you will delight yourself in Him, He will give you the desires of your heart. That means if you'll keep God in first place, if you'll honor Him with your life, He'll cause people to want to be good to you. He'll cause you to be at the right place at the right time. His blessings will chase you down and overtake you.

Take your limits off God.

Why don't you get out of your box and say, "God, I'm ready for some of these explosive blessings. I'm ready for Your far-and-beyond favor."

In Scripture, God promised Sarah a child. At first she didn't believe it. She thought she was too old. I love what God said in Genesis 18:14: "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?"

God says to each of us: "Is there anything too hard for Me?"

Do you think your dreams are too big for God to bring to pass? Do you think that a relationship is too far gone for God to restore? Do you think you have to live with that sickness the rest of your life?

No. Get a new vision today. Put on a new attitude. God is saying, "I am all-powerful. I can turn any situation

around." It doesn't matter what it looks like in the natural. He is a supernatural God.

The Amplified Bible puts it this way: "Is there anything too hard or too wonderful for the Lord?" Sometimes when we hear stories of supernatural blessings, we think, That's just too good to be true. A friend gave you funds to pay off a building project? Somebody you didn't even know gave you a swimming pool? Our down-to-earth minds say, No way. That's impossible.

But notice what kind of Heavenly God we serve. He said, "Is there anything too wonderful for Me?" He's saying, "If you'll take the limits off Me, I'll amaze you with My goodness. I'll not only meet your needs, I'll take it one step further. I'll give you the desires of your heart."

One Bible translation calls these "the secret petitions of your heart." These are our hidden dreams, the secret desires and promises you haven't shared with anyone. They are just between you and God.

Know this today: God wants to bring your secret petitions to pass. Will you get a vision for it? Will you put your faith out there?

Sometimes we think, Well, I couldn't believe for a swimming pool. That wouldn't be right. Or God's got bigger things to deal with than my getting this business off the ground, or taking this trip overseas to see my relatives. I can't bother God with that. That's not important enough.

I believe it's just the opposite: God put the dream in your heart.

As a parent, I love to do good things for my children. I love to make their days special. Your Heavenly Father is longing to be good to you in the same way. He wants to amaze you with His goodness.

This is what my mother did with her swimming pool dream. She easily could have let my father talk her out of it. She could have come up with all the reasons why it was not workable and why she probably didn't deserve it. But she simply made a decision to stay in faith. She didn't try to figure it all out. She had the attitude, "Lord, I believe." She was saying, "God, I know You want to be good to me."

When you truly believe, it sets a series of events into motion. God gave that couple from out of state a desire to do something for my parents. Here they were hundreds of miles away minding their own business. All of the sudden they feel an urge to come to Houston. They have the idea, of all things, to give my parents a swimming pool. Why not just make a donation to the church, give them money, give them stock?

God wants to give you the desires of your heart. I believe even right now, because you're in faith, because you're saying, "Lord, I believe," God is arranging things in your favor. He is lining up the right people, the right opportunities.

In the coming days you will see supernatural increase, explosive blessings. God will give you the desires of your heart. That's just what happened to Sarah in the Scriptures. She eventually conceived even though she was way beyond the childbearing years. She had a son, Isaac. It was far-and-beyond favor, and she knew it. I love what

she said.

"Who would have ever thought I could have a child at such an old age?" In other words, she was so amazed, all she could say was, "Who would believe this would ever happen?" That's what God wants to do for every one of us. He wants us to say, "Who would have ever thought somebody would give me a swimming pool?" Or "Who would have ever thought we would be worshipping one day in the former Compaq Center?" "Who would have ever thought a friend would give me the funds to pay off a project and then have some left over?"

God wants to give you some of these "Who would have thought?" blessings. They are not your average "I made it through" blessings. God's dream is for you to say, "Who would have thought this would be my best year? It was supposed to be a down year. Who would have thought I'd ever be so well and feel so healthy when the medical report says I'm not even supposed to be here?"

How about this one? "Who would have thought God would bless me in such abundance that I can give away more than I used to make?"

You might as well get ready. God's got some of these "who would have thought" blessings coming your way. You are headed for supernatural increase, supernatural healing, supernatural restoration.

God wants to amaze you with His goodness.

"Well," you say, "Joel, I don't see how that could happen for me. I don't see how I could ever get out of these problems. I don't see how I could ever be well."

Here's the key: You don't have to see how. That's not your job. Your job is to believe. God has all kinds of ways to bring your dreams to pass. He has ways you've never even thought of. That's why it says in Proverbs "Lean not to your own understanding."

Sometimes there is no logical solution. Sometimes there is no way out in the natural. If you constantly try to figure it out, you will just get frustrated. Eventually, you'll get discouraged and just settle where you are. Again, understand this: Just because you don't see a way doesn't mean that God doesn't have a way.

Little Lindsey wanted a kitten. She kept asking her mother week after week for this kitten. But her mother didn't want any more pets around the house. She said no to her daughter's dream again and again. But this little girl was so determined, she reminds me of my mother and her swimming pool dream.

Month after month Lindsey kept asking for that kitten. Finally, out of frustration, the mother said, "Listen, honey. If God gives you a kitten I'll let you keep it. But we're not buying one."

Well, Lindsey didn't know any better. She went out in the backyard, got down on her knees, and said, "God, I'm asking You to please give me a kitten."

When she finished praying with the mother watching over her, all of a sudden out of nowhere a kitten comes flying out of the sky and lands a few feet away. The mother could not believe her eyes. She thought she was seeing things. There was no tree overhead. It looked like

the kitten had fallen from the heavens.

Lindsey picked it up and said, "Look, Mommy. God gave me my kitten." The mother stood there dumbfounded, in disbelief.

Several months later she learned what happened. The neighbors who lived behind her and a few houses down were trying to get this little kitten out of a tree, but it was too tall for the man to reach with his ladder. So this man tied a rope to the tree, and he hooked the rope to the back bumper of the car.

He started slowly pulling forward in the car to bend the tree over. Just when he got the tree bent low enough to reach the kitten, the rope slipped and the tree acted like a slingshot.

It slung that kitten nearly two hundred yards—three houses down—and it fell right at that little girl's feet. That man felt terrible. No one could find the kitten. He thought it was dead. He didn't know that he'd answered a little girl's prayer. God works in mysterious ways.

Now that little girl can say, "Who would have ever thought God would have rained down a kitten from the heavens?" Is there anything too difficult for the Lord? Is there anything too wonderful for our God? He knows how to put you in the right place at the right time.

If you are single and looking for a relationship, God can bring the right person into your life. I wouldn't expect that person to drop out of the sky, though. If that happens, you better call the police.

But God can bring somebody great across your path. Don't doubt that. Remember the three simple words: "Lord, I believe."

In other words, "God, I know this is my year for supernatural connections. I know You're directing my steps. And, God, I believe You can even sling somebody across my path."

That's what happened to Victoria. I got slung into her jewelry store. At least that's my side of the story.

I met a couple at a bookstore in Manhattan not long ago. We were doing a book signing. They came up to the table and said this was their first wedding anniversary. Of course, I congratulated them. They were just beaming from ear to ear, so happy. They went on to say they had met at my book signing one year earlier in that same bookstore. They had never seen each other before. It just so happened they were standing in line next to each other. They visited for an hour or so. They ended up dating and eventually they got married.

Good things happen when you come to my book signings. I told that man, "You owe me a finder's fee."

She was a beautiful young lady. That young man can say, "Who would have thought I'd go to a book signing and come away with a beautiful wife?" Boy, that bookstore will be a popular place when word leaks about this!

My friend, God is in control of the universe. He is directing your steps, causing you to be in the right place at the right time. He knows what you need and He knows how to get it to you.

He can cause a salesman to knock at your door and give you a kidney. He can cause a friend to call you and pay off a mortgage. He can rain down a kitten from the skies.

I'm asking you today to release your faith for a supernatural year. You may have seen victories in your past, but what God wants to do in your future will supersede anything you've ever seen before. This is your year for far-and-beyond favor. This is your year for supernatural opportunities, supernatural connections.

You may not see how it can happen, but remember: God has a way. He not only wants to meet your needs He wants to give you the desires of your heart.

And it's my prayer that you will get a revelation of how much your Heavenly Father is longing to be good to you. He even wants to give you the secret dreams of your heart. If you'll go out each day expecting to have a supernatural year, believing for supernatural favor, then you will see God show up and show out in amazing ways.

You will experience many "Who would have thought?" blessings—explosive blessings that will blast you to a whole new level. And when you look back, you can say, "This was not an average year, not a mediocre year. It was a supernatural year."

It's time to stretch! It's your time!

CONCLUSION

In this era of rapid change and instant communication, writing a book is an interesting process that moves at its own steady pace-while everything else speeds along. When I began writing *It's Your Time*, the recession was in full swing, Wall Street was disintegrating, banks across the country were in crisis, and fears of a total economic collapse were running rampant.

Experts said it could last for years, but I believe we've entered into a new season. The storm has subsided and a new day is dawning. My prayer is that in reading *It's Your Time* you will feel your faith has been inspired, your vision has been enlarged, and you will realize you are closer than you think—closer to accomplishing your dreams, closer to seeing your breakthrough, closer to experiencing a new level of God's favor.

Remember, you have the DNA of Almighty God. He has equipped you with everything you need to fulfill your destiny. You are full of wisdom, strength, talent, and creativity. In your future are "handfuls on purpose," favor, good breaks, the right connections, the right opportunities. You may not have seen those blessings in the past, but this is a new day.

It's Your Time to believe. It's Your Time for favor. It's Your Time for restoration. It's Your Time to trust. It's Your Time to stretch. If you'll get up each morning with faith and expectancy, praying bold prayers, living a life that honors God, then you will step into one of your moments of favor and instead of believing for a dream, you'll be living your dream, walking in the fullness of God's blessing.

Friend, it's your time!

- Joel Osteen

WE CARE ABOUT YOU

I believe there is a void in every person that only a relationship with God can fill. I'm not talking about finding religion or joining a particular church. I'm talking about developing a relationship with your Heavenly Father through His Son, Jesus Christ I believe that knowing Him is the source of true peace and fulfillment in life.

I encourage you to pray, "Jesus, I believe You died for me and rose from the dead, so now I want to live for You. I am tuning away from my sins and placing my trust in You. I acknowledge You as my Savior and Lord, and I'm asking You to guide my life from now on."

With that simple prayer, you can get a fresh, clean start, and establish a close relationship with God. Read the Bible every day; talk to God through prayer, and attend a good Bible-based church where you can find friends who will lift you up rather than pull you down. Keep God in first place in your life and follow His principles; He will take you places you've not yet imagined!

For free information on how you can grow stronger in your spiritual life, we encourage you to contact us. Victoria and I love you and we will be praying for you. We'd love to hear from you!

To contact us, write to:

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Or you can reach us online www.jelosleen.com

I don't know where you are headed, what your dreams are, or how many obstacles you have to overcome.

But I encourage you to let these words reach deep down into your spirit. Receive them by faith. *You are closer than you think.* A global recession has forced many to postpone their dreams and cancel their plans. You may have lost your job. You may have lost your savings, maybe even your home. It could be that you have health concerns or relationship problems. Maybe you are frustrated because it's taking so long to get where you want to be in your life. Yet now is not the time to talk yourself out of your goals and dreams. Now is not the time to get discouraged. You may think as I sometimes have, that you're not even halfway to your goal. You may feel you have so far to go. But the truth is, you don't know. Your dream may just be up around the corner. You may think it will take another two years. But if you stay in faith, who knows? It may just be two more months. You are closer than you think. I believe it's your time.

—Joel Osteen

RELIGION

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