

Introduction

Survivor.

We hear that word a lot these days. Survivors have stories—and usually a few secrets to share with us. Especially about how they made it out of whatever it was they faced—alive. Some of you have had your own “uh-oh, this may be my last breath of life” moments. I want to tell you about mine.

My brush with death came more than a decade ago on a quiet Saturday morning in February. Our youngest, Michael, was four at the time. We were headed to the beach for a quick overnighter. My husband, David, and our other two children, Bethany and David Banner, had various work and sports commitments, so Michael and I launched out on our own little beach adventure—just the two of us. It was an unseasonably warm weekend, well worth the four-hour drive to enjoy the Carolina coast. I was ready for a day of sea and sunshine. Besides, the beach is my favorite place and Michael is a beach lover, too.

We got an early start and stopped about an hour outside of Charlotte at the Burger King in Wadesboro on Highway 74, headed for the coast. After going in to buy a quick kids’ breakfast and

INTRODUCTION

refilling my coffee cup, we walked back to the car, eager to get on the road. Once in the parking lot, I turned around and motioned to Michael to hurry up. I wondered why this normally cooperative child just stood there on the curb holding his little bag of breakfast with an odd look on his face. A split second later, I knew why. My world suddenly exploded in pain as I was hit by a van backing up—rather quickly I might add.

The experience seemed to happen in slow motion, but I was more able to think than I would have imagined. My first thought was, *You are being hit hard by a van.* (Instinctively I knew it was a van because it hit me in the head as well as my back.) *Secondly, the driver is still backing up and doesn't know you are here, so scream, and LOUDLY.* Now, this is significant because by nature, I am not a screamer. But I screamed—bloody murder. The van backed over me. Thankfully I was in between and not under the wheels. After what seemed like an eternity, the van finally came to a halt. Everything rushed, but in slow motion.

The woman who hit me (she looked like a soccer mom also on her way to the beach) jumped out of the van—horrified. A crowd quickly assembled. Bleeding, I hopped up off the pavement, with injured knees and elbows, frantically looking around for my son.

I found Michael sitting by himself on the curb, so I went over and sat down beside my trembling child. I was more worried about this little four-year-old who just watched his mother get plowed over by a minivan than I was about myself. I resisted the offer of the EMTs to take me to the hospital in the pickup truck that was the rescue vehicle on duty in Wadesboro that morning—though I did let them bandage my wounds.

I thanked the kind bystanders and the Burger King workers who brought Michael a fresh happy meal. Then, I got back in my car,

INTRODUCTION

with my bruised and broken body, and slowly drove the remaining three hours to the beach. I was determined to make sure my little son had his day at the beach to erase the memory of what he said was “the worst day of my life.”

We ended up buying another happy meal that night, so he could wait forty-five minutes with me in the Emergency Room after my elbow swelled to three times its size. My arm turned black and blue—an ugly hematoma—but no broken bones.

Before Michael dropped off to sleep the next evening, after a peaceful day enjoying the beach, he said, “Mom, this was the best day of my life!” I guess that’s how God made four year olds.

And God made mothers to cope with crises. Most people, when faced with a life-and-death moment, discover that there is an incredible will to live—to survive. Journalist Laurence Gonzales has done decades of research into discovering why some people survive and others perish. Gonzales found that survivors tend to exhibit several behaviors. Simply stated, survivors “breathe,” they “organize,” and they “act.”¹

They take a moment to breathe and reflect, rather than plunging immediately into panic or impulse (*Gee, I’ve just been hit by a minivan*). They formulate a plan (*Better scream loudly*), then they take action (*Scream!*). Those who survive also tend to discover that caring for someone else more than themselves (I’ve got to comfort my child) is an important factor in survival and its aftermath.

Less than a year after my accident, I would find myself walking through another variation of the “breathe—organize—act” response, but not for myself. I was simply one of the millions around the world who sat stunned as we watched the World Trade Center attack on 9/11. And while my personal safety did not hang in the balance, I knew that life as we knew it would never be the same.

INTRODUCTION

Gonzales's survival behaviors are remarkably like some patterns that emerged in my own response to the tragedy. Just like the majority of Americans, my first response was to pray. Instinctively, I took time to "breathe," and sensed God calling me to be alert—to watch, listen, and pray for our nation, and beyond. I "organized" a strategy to pray that included a detailed list along with methods of praying the promises of God's Word. I "took action," by tapping into teamwork and exploring ways I could be the answer to other people's prayers. I didn't realize it then, but September 11 ignited a personal journey that would ultimately change the trajectory of my life. But the real story is about God. He was calling me to become an active prayer warrior for a hurting and broken world that He deeply loves.

In the course of this journey—a journey that I know beyond a doubt that was God ordained—I saw amazing answers to personal prayers for my own family. But I also found myself moving outside my world of comfort. I discovered a world beyond my own that led me to places and people I never knew even existed, beginning with my own community. I didn't know where I was going at the time—I only tried to be faithful to listen to God on a daily basis.

But patterns began to form and I quickly realized that this journey was taking me somewhere. There was a method, and there was purpose. So I began marking the path, and soon enough, I began teaching others how to follow the steps themselves.

Technically speaking, there are six steps laid out in this book to developing a deeper and more effective prayer life. But the important thing to note is that all of the parts are interrelated. They are not mutually exclusive—rather, they depend on one another. So you will notice, throughout the book, that although each chapter will have a main theme, I will often mention some or all of the other

INTRODUCTION

parts within that chapter, because all six steps coexist in harmony. In time, I think you'll find that the steps will help you develop your own rhythm of prayer.

With God's help and grace, I have been developing these steps for nearly ten years, since just after 9/11. They began as a journey, and they happened neither perfectly chronologically nor without trial and error. But I know this: they have revolutionized my prayer life, as well as my everyday life, into something more powerful and wondrous than I could have imagined. Nothing's perfect, but with prayer, it is *good*.

Here are the steps I followed, in a nutshell. We'll go over them in much greater detail in the following chapters.

1. *Be Alert*. The first thing I learned was that I needed to be alert not only to God's voice but to the needs all around me. Being alert meant I was intentional about listening for God's voice, watching for signs of His work. This is no small order in an era that is too busy, too noisy, and often numbed out by ever-pressing demands.
2. *Be Specific*. The calling to pray for the world is a tall order, and awareness of that call taught me what it means to be specific when I asked God to act on my behalf or on behalf of others. How specific was I to be? Specific enough so I would recognize the answers as they came.
3. *Pray with Authority*. Learning how to pray God's Word into situations gave solid footing to my prayers. And that gave me biblical authority—which only added power to my prayers. I took lessons from God's Instruction Book and found mentors in some of the world changers like Elijah, Peter, and Paul. And the best training tips came straight from Jesus Himself.

INTRODUCTION

4. *Agree with Others in Prayer.* Don't go this alone, God implored me. So I learned the power of agreement with others in prayer.
5. *Arm Yourself with Spiritual Strength.* Life is full of spiritual as well as earthly battles. It is important, I learned, to arm myself with spiritual strength for the spiritual war that incessantly wages behind the scenes.
6. *Answer God's Call.* Pretty soon into this journey I realized that the point of all this was not simply to find one more prayer technique or add one more Bible study method to my already tall stack. If that's all that came of this journey, then "so what"? I kept telling myself that my life was either a "so what" or a "so that." I wanted to grow in my understanding of prayer and sharpen my listening. The point of all this was so that I could be useful to God. I wanted to answer God's call to go into the world with the good news of Jesus Christ and to share His love with the least and the lost.

One of the places my personal prayer journey has taken me, several times over, is Africa. I'll explain more throughout the book, but for now, I'll share this. The Africans have a word, *sankofa*, which means "to walk forward while looking back." This describes my journey quite well. As I look back over the last ten years, the steps have emerged somewhat clearly in retrospect, though at the time, I was only feeling my way along.

In common vernacular, *sankofa* also can mean this: "It is not taboo to go back and fetch what one forgot." As part of the six steps in prayer, I've included some lessons I've learned in my larger journey of thirty-plus years of walking with Christ. I went back in my memory banks and "fetched" some of what I had forgotten. So you'll read about my life as a coed at a large southern university in

INTRODUCTION

the seventies, when I was more absorbed with fun, football games, and finding myself than I was with finding God. I'll tell of what I learned about persevering in prayer during years of struggling with infertility—and celebrations of God's victories when David and my three children were born. There was much I went back to "fetch." Not a drop was wasted.

Just what can prayer do? I agree with nineteenth-century author E. M. Bounds, who said, "Prayer can do anything God can do." I learned that if you truly commit your heart to God and are willing to be used by Him in prayer, miraculous things can happen.

The following book is a collection of footprints I've left as I've walked this journey with God. But I must be clear: there is lots of room for your own creative mind to tweak, reconfigure, or discard parts of my particular pattern. If I can catch a glimpse of God at work both in my own backyard and around the world, I think this adventure is available to anyone, in any way God desires.

"God," I had prayed on the morning of 9/11, "what would happen if I committed to pray for your world?" This story is the journey that follows.