

PRAISE FOR *EVERY LITTLE WIN*

“What if the very things we thought would sink us are the things meant to build us into who we were made to be? In their very candid and vulnerable book, Todd and Brooke lay it all bare, sharing the real and raw ups and downs of their lives. This is to point readers not to what they have overcome but to the One who can make all things new. *Every Little Win* is a beautiful, heartfelt invitation for all of us to embrace our story and to find real lasting hope no matter what we’ve faced.”

—PATRICK AND RUTH SCHWENK, AUTHORS OF *IN A BOAT IN THE MIDDLE OF A LAKE: TRUSTING THE GOD WHO MEETS US IN OUR STORM* AND HOSTS OF *ROOTLIKE FAITH* PODCAST

“If you’ve ever had a dream yet to be realized or struggled to see a clear path to victory in your life, get ready to be encouraged. Todd and Brooke Tilghman know exactly how you feel. Their story will inspire you to keep trying, and in trying, discover that God has a plan and a purpose for every part of your story.”

—HEIDI ST. JOHN, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BECOMING MOMSTRONG: HOW TO FIGHT WITH ALL THAT’S IN YOU FOR YOUR FAMILY AND YOUR FAITH* AND HOST OF *OFF THE BENCH WITH HEIDI ST. JOHN* PODCAST

**EVERY
LITTLE WIN**

EVERY LITTLE WIN

*How Celebrating Small Victories
Can Lead to Big Joy*

TODD & BROOKE TILGHMAN
WITH TRICIA GOYER



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Every Little Win

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*To Eagan, Asher, Shepard, Judah, Olive,
Hosea, Louie, and Wilhelmina.
You all have given us such indescribable joy.
Being your mama and daddy is the big win.*

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Prelude

I couldn't hear my own footsteps as I walked onto the Hollywood stage, maybe due to the loud thumping of my heart. Auditorium lights were dim, and the faces in the crowd indistinguishable. Yet I could feel their eyes on me. And even though I sang for that audience, the opinions of four coaches sitting in red chairs would determine if I would be part of this internationally viewed singing competition.

Megastars Nick Jonas, John Legend, Blake Shelton, and Kelly Clarkson sat with their backs to me. The turn of one chair would impact the course of the coming weeks—and maybe even years. Everyone knew that. Yet, as I paused in the middle of the stage, noting the pinpricks of spotlights that broke through the darkness, I knew I had already changed. When it comes to a competition like this, everyone is focused on who's the favorite and which singer they think is going to win the show. Deep down, just by being on this stage, my soul had already claimed a win. Even without one chair turn, a transformation had already happened in my heart.

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If you're reading this book, you no doubt know the end of the story. Maybe you journeyed with me through season 18 of *The Voice*. Or perhaps you first heard my singing in a video clip shared on YouTube or Facebook. Some may believe that when I sang "We've Got Tonight" and four chairs turned, things changed. But I'm here to tell you that *The Voice* stage isn't where the biggest change happened. The fact that I was a pastor from deep in the Bible Belt, standing on a Hollywood stage, and singing a secular song proved that I was a different man than when I first started seeking God as a teen. For years I'd been so focused on doing everything right that I didn't give much thought to what God wanted to do with my life. Turns out, he had a few things in mind for me, things I've been happy to discover.

You might have picked up this book thinking it's a story about a pastor's sudden rise to fame. Instead, it's a book about a journey from fear to freedom. Brooke and I didn't set out to make a major discovery, but as we've faced the ups and downs in life, we've observed that the way to move from fear to freedom—and from freedom to joy—is to celebrate all the little wins in life, especially the wins we often forget to notice.

A "win" can be choosing to stand in line to audition for a television show, or it can be sitting down to talk things out with your spouse instead of turning and stomping away. Wins happen every day, but we often forget to notice them. It turns out the simple saying "count your blessings" is really where everything changes. At the end of the day, when we look for our wins and celebrate them, things start to change. *We* start to change. And each of us can take this journey.

My wife, Brooke, and I have been married twenty-two years, and we've overcome more fears than we can count. We've been

at the brink of divorce, have had a critically ill child, and have struggled to make ends meet (always). Brooke was bound by anxiety and depression for years, and it's a battle she still fights. She'll tell her story about that within these pages.

Brooke and I also pastored a small Mississippi church for over a decade, and no matter what anyone says, pastoring isn't easy. There were always good times in pastoring, but there was also so much that was a struggle. Some people believed we didn't do things right, while others extended kindness.

We adopted two beautiful girls internationally when doing so was impossible on a pastor's salary. We're raising eight kids, each with unique personalities and struggles, which is a full-time job all in itself. On paper, our lives look very full but hardly remarkable—unless you look for the small wins.

Huge achievements get noticed. But if Brooke and I had waited around to find joy until we got a big win, we would have missed out on the amazing life we've lived. Instead, we've found triumph in the mundane. Even in the middle of our hardships, we've sought—and clung to—God's goodness. This has brought happiness in our everyday lives and also allowed us to dare to try for bigger wins. Each step of fighting the fear, and looking for the win, brought us to where we are today. Not only did seeking small joys pave the way to every bigger step, these joys also built up hope within us until it was hard to contain.

As I sang on *The Voice* stage, the joy came bubbling out. Blake Shelton called my bounce "a holy hop." I call it joy in God's goodness. As I sang, thankfulness welled up within me until I couldn't hold it in. That moment was a bright light after a dark road of suffering, and I think it'll help you better understand the joy of this journey if we talk a bit about the suffering first.

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I wrote the words below in my journal in 2017 during a particularly difficult season in our lives—before *The Voice*, before I had a number-one song on iTunes. This gives you a glimpse of what God was doing in my heart:

Suffering is kind of an odd thing. It's something we can all relate to, but each person's suffering is uniquely theirs. I have been in full-time ministry since I was eighteen years old, which has given me some perspective on suffering. And this I know most of all: when someone is breaking, no matter why, it hurts.

Too often we fall prey to the puffed-up pride that says, "You think that's bad? Wait until you hear what I went through!" Don't do that. Don't minimize someone else's pain, and don't allow their circumstances to minimize yours.

I don't pastor a megachurch, and (so far) no tracks on iTunes. I don't have a whole bunch of degrees. Here's what I do have. The same thing as you, maybe: a bunch of years of experience dealing with my own pain and the pain of others.

The truth is that even though Brooke and I have ministered in a little Mississippi church for many years, and we have a bunch of kids, we're probably not a whole lot different than you. We know what it is to suffer. We know what it is to break. We can tell you stories of bending every which way to show someone the love of Jesus only to have them step right on your face.

I ended the journal entry noting "two important things to grasp":

Your suffering isn't forever. Your suffering isn't for nothing.

When I came across that entry not long after I won *The Voice*, I chuckled, especially at the line “(So far) no tracks on iTunes.” Even back then, I was considering I might do a little something with music. I was dabbling with writing a few songs and trying to record them myself. Never could I have imagined that just a few years later I’d have two songs on iTunes: one sung with Blake Shelton and also an original, “Long Way Home,” that made it to number one on the iTunes chart. And since you’re reading these words a bit beyond 2017, I’m going to add a couple more important things to my list:

1. Suffering can cause us to face our greatest fears and discover God there, even during painful moments.
2. Freedom and joy come when we look for the little wins in everyday life. Things might not change, but our perspectives can. Even though we may not see how anything good can come out of our circumstances, looking for the little wins leads us to trust God with the bigger story of our lives.

Right now, your heart may be breaking. You might have just buried a spouse, a parent, or a child. You could be in the hellacious firestorm of divorce, or maybe you’ve filed for bankruptcy, or perhaps you feel like you’re walking through wet cement every day just to make it to bedtime. Brooke and I want to share our personal stories in hope that you’ll gain a better perspective of *your story*. We don’t share these things to draw attention to ourselves. Instead, we want to draw attention to God and all he’s done in times we’ve suffered and in times we’ve celebrated. We feel this is especially important these days when suffering has

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been highlighted in nearly every news story from New York City to Meridian, Mississippi, and far beyond.

No one expected 2020 to turn out like it did. We didn't have "global pandemic" penciled in on our calendars. And as the calendar has flipped over to a new year, deep holes of isolation are only being matched by stockpiles of fear. Like no other time in history, we're all going through a different type of suffering.

Suffering normally doesn't send a "save the date." But if you're in the middle of it, that doesn't mean you did anything wrong. Things happen in the world, and to us personally, that don't make sense. But even in the middle of it all, good things can happen. I'm living proof of that. So many have told me that my singing—during *The Voice* and after—has brought them joy during a very hard time. I'm thankful.

I'm thankful that I was given this amazing platform from which to sing, and that I have a dedicated wife and eight kids cheering me on. It all seems like a miracle to me—especially since my marriage to Brooke nearly failed before it hardly got started. Without us together we would have missed out on the family we have, both kids born and those adopted.

Looking at the odds, and our past, Brooke and I shouldn't be together. We've been at the breaking point, but instead of giving up, we pushed through to discover it's so much better on the other side. I've said from the pulpit a hundred times: I would never want to go through all the pain of facing divorce again, but I also wouldn't take a million dollars to have never lived it. It was worth more than I can say. The pain and the suffering taught us about each other, about God, about restoration, and about how good marriage really can be. And that's just one of the biggies. There have been many potholes on our journey.

I held tight to the goodness of God in 2017—after many hard years of suffering—even when I wasn't in the spotlight. Then, God gave me a chance to share his goodness to over seven million people, through music and song and even without words. Freedom and joy have a way of exploding out of us, making others take notice. And that's what happened onstage at *The Voice*.

My songs and my joy have gained many people's attention. My smile and holy hop have caused people to lean in. Many people said they were drawn to the genuineness of this ordinary pastor from Mississippi, which stirred up interest in what Brooke and I have to say. And we don't take this lightly. We've prayed about what to share and how to share it.

Some parts of our story are plainer to see. I lost 110 pounds a few years back, finding a sense of freedom from food addiction, but my eating and health is still something of which I have to be aware. We have two Korean daughters, and like many people who want to adopt, we had to depend on the financial giving of family, friends, and strangers to bring our girls home. This came after Brooke's many years of praying for a daughter once we'd had our three wonderful boys.

Other parts of our story aren't highlighted on social media. We've struggled with family relationships, and our kids have been hurt by people we've trusted. We've been wounded and blessed by the church, and we've no doubt wounded and blessed others too. God has done a lot of work there. He's been faithful.

Yet perhaps the biggest changes have happened within our hearts. For most of my life, one of my biggest motivators was making church people happy. Looking back, I see my insecurities and how a lack of understanding of God's desires for my

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life caused me to be a people pleaser. I served in ways I thought a godly man should serve, deep down hoping I was doing *good enough*.

I've been a worship leader, youth pastor, and pastor, yet even in my efforts to serve God, there were some seasons when I was just going through the motions. There were other seasons when my pride pushed me to strive for perfection, and then I fell flat on my face when I couldn't achieve it. And even as I tried to give my all, I usually believed it was never enough.

In recent years, my biggest struggle was with the discontent in my heart that dreamed of "something else" besides pastoring. It's not that my life was horrible. Not even close. Yet there was a stirring inside that told me I wanted more. It's a stirring I fought against. After all, the Bible says that "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:6).

If my wife heard me talk about "doing something different" once, she heard it a thousand times. Yet even though the inner pull for something more was there, the sensible part of me usually took over. I was a preacher's kid who became a worship leader at sixteen, a youth pastor at eighteen, an associate pastor at thirty, and then—when my father left the pulpit—the head pastor of our church. As a father of eight children, on the salary of a small church, daily life was meager, and I didn't think I should or could do anything else to put food on the table. Still, there was something inside me that said things could be different. I just had no idea how.

Even when I filled out the paperwork and was given a slot for the Atlanta auditions for *The Voice*, I didn't think going was worth the drive. *How could anything come of it?* As I stood in line for hours with thousands of other hopefuls, I was frustrated—with

the line, with the waste of time, but mostly with myself. *Why couldn't I just be satisfied?*

Looking back, this was all part of my journey from fear to faith. And then from faith to joy. Fear says: “If we aren’t satisfied with where God has us, we have a problem within us.” But faith says something different: “Maybe those inner nudges of dissatisfaction are actually from God. Maybe he’s wanting us to look to him for something more.” And that something more has brought more joy than I can describe.

From the time I was a child, I’ve had a song on my lips. And during this dark, difficult time in our country’s history—a pandemic, natural disasters, and heartbreaking racial injustices—maybe God had a plan. A plan to use me and the songs that I sang to give people hope. A plan to remind me that faith sometimes is just stepping onto the stage that God has prepared.

And maybe now, it’s time for me to encourage *you* in that too.



Often a day—or a season—passes, and we easily paste labels on it like *good* or *bad*, *easy* or *difficult*. It’s not until a big life change happens, and we take time to reflect, that we begin to understand that some good was happening in the middle of the bad or some growing was going on even when things were difficult.

Brooke and I have done a lot of contemplating lately. The win on *The Voice* made us take more notice of all the little wins that have happened along the way—things that didn’t seem too important at the time prepared us for the life changes to come.

Since most of life isn’t marked by scoreboards or report cards, sometimes we forget to look for the wins. Many times it seems

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our lives are lacking. When we scan social media, we find that everyone appears to have their acts together except us. We compare our old cars to someone's new one and feel insufficient. Another person's job promotion can cause dissatisfaction in our hearts. Yet we all know the truth: money doesn't equal happiness, and those who seem to have it all are often hurting the most and hiding it. But things change when we take note of the wins in life.

Some wins, like coming in first in a national singing competition, are obvious. But there are tons more that we often don't notice. Brooke and I will point out these wins that we can see clearly now, even when they were hardly noticeable at the time. We encourage you to do the same. But how?

1. Gratitude helps you take note of wins. Focus on what is good. Focus on what God is doing, even in the midst of hard stuff. Stop comparing and appreciate that you are a work in progress. Be thankful for the little things and big things alike.
2. The wins in our lives are often tied to the growing relationships in our lives. When we take time to listen and care for others, we often find ourselves listened to and cared for.
3. We win when we understand that our stories matter. We can look for purpose in the pain. We can find meaning even in heartache. A shift in perspective changes everything, and small celebrations along the way can lead to big wins in our minds, hearts, and lives.

WINS FOR TODAY

- ✓ We win when we focus on God. When fear says there is something wrong with us, faith reminds us that God loves us so much he wants to give us the desires of our hearts—and he wants *all* of us.
- ✓ We win when we believe that God has good plans for us.
- ✓ We win when we understand God's love isn't dependent on us doing everything right.
- ✓ We win when we face our greatest suffering, or greatest fear, and can still see glimpses of God's goodness there.
- ✓ We win when we look for one blessing, *even one*, to count today.

CHAPTER I

The Start of a Story and a Song

TODD

I was born into a soulfulness that comes from community, church, and common adversity. I don't remember this, but I'm told that when I was just a toddler, I'd play Matchbox cars on the wrinkled blankets of my granddaddy's bed in the weeks before his death. And it was during that time, at my granddaddy's side, when a country preacher spoke a seed of a promise that has grown into full bloom forty years later. What most of my family saw as a toddler's humming, God stirred within that preacher's heart as something more at work. I like knowing that my granddaddy got to be a part of that.

My granddaddy, Horace James Tilghman—whom everyone called Big Daddy—was born in 1891. He was a farmer on the Mississippi Delta his whole life. My Granny Louise was his second wife, after his first wife's passing. Big Daddy had grown kids when they married, and they had two more together: my dad, Clarence, and my aunt, Brenda. Dad was born when Big Daddy was sixty-five years old. I wasn't yet three when Big Daddy passed, but I have vague memories of him sitting in this high-back black chair that looked like leather. But that was before his stroke. After that, he was in a hospital bed at his house—the one I would climb up on to play. Sometimes I'd stand next to his bed and “sing.”

I'm told that even in diapers, I'd rock side to side and hum.

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As I moved from one side to the next, I'd hit a note and then sway back and hit it again. As I got a bit older, I'd do the same as I ate. I'd lean forward, hum, take a bite. Lean back and hum as I chewed. I'm sure my mama loved that.

I was at the foot of Big Daddy's bed, swaying and humming, when the preacher, Hulon Evans, came by for a visit. Before he left, he looked down at me and said, "That boy has a special anointing to sing."

Big Daddy only lived a few more weeks after that, and my dad tells me that during his last days on earth, Big Daddy got glimpses of heaven. As he stared up at the ceiling, his eyes saw something more.

"Oh, look at those fields," he'd tell my dad. "Look at those crops. I've never seen crops like that." Seems fitting for a farmer. And it seems fitting that seed of promise for my singing future was planted at Big Daddy's bedside.

I don't remember Pastor Evans's words about my special anointing, but I do remember standing near the altar of Granny Louise's church singing a "special," a solo in front of the whole congregation, at age eight. Pastor Evans must've been proud to see his prophecy taking root, because when I was done with my song, he picked me up and gave me a kiss, and I knew I'd done well. The church folks had a tender way of encouraging kids like me to be involved. Church wasn't just some place I attended; it shaped who I was, especially with regard to music.

Many things come to mind when people think of Mississippi. Cotton fields, muddy waters, and the rhythm of trains on firefly nights. Old men sitting on benches in front of the courthouse, shooting the breeze. Old women in floral dresses, clutching Bibles to their chests as they sit in pews, amen-ing the visiting

evangelist. People who are familiar with the South understand that the rise and fall of sharp-note hymns and the high and low cadence of a preacher's sermon are as much a part of life as the orchestra of crickets and katydids when the moon rises.

Now, unless you grew up in a southern church environment, there are a few more terms you may not be familiar with. In the Church of God, the denomination in which I grew up and served—and in many other evangelical and pentecostal denominations—to have a special *anointing* means that God has enabled you for a unique purpose in your life. And if you are part of the congregation, you're called *Brother* or *Sister* out of respect for older adults in the church. As I was growing up, these folks were like family. We had a feeling of kinship with one another. It's like having a whole lotta aunts and uncles who keep tabs on you in the best way possible.

The language of the church was as foundational to my childhood (and my life) as hot summer days, pecan pies, and singing hymns like "Blessed Assurance" and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." I grew up knowing what things were acceptable and what things could get me into trouble. Rock music, television shows that depicted kids being disrespectful to parents, and going to the movies without my folks were off-limits.

Brooke says, for her, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* wasn't allowed, probably because the true master of the universe is Jesus, and no one wanted their kids to get confused. Smurfs were bad too. Some preachers said the *Smurfs* cartoon had satanic themes, and we knew better than to question this logic.

Maybe it's just my personality, but growing up, I felt like a lot of people were trying to scare me to Jesus. Even though church leaders taught me that Jesus loved me, at times there was a "turn

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or burn” mentality in the things I heard. That’s what makes my story—this story—one about transformation. I’ve overcome the burden of trying to do everything right, and instead I simply follow where God leads me and share the love of Jesus the best I can. And, as you’ll read in this book, it’s been a process.

My stepping onto the stage at *The Voice* and singing a song that isn’t played on Christian radio is a clear example of the freedom I’ve found from the legalism I felt, though it was largely self-imposed. I’ve found the freedom to know that God’s love isn’t contingent on whether or not I do things right—or if I do them good enough. I can fall and fail, and God won’t love me less. I’ve learned that over the years.

Jesus himself was born into obscurity. He slept in a manger, and those who came to see him first—the shepherds—were some of the dirtiest, stinkiest, and poorest people of all. I don’t think God sent his only Son to be born in a stable, perform all those miracles, and then die on the cross just to keep us out of hell. I think God did all that so we could know him and because he loves us. His sacrifice was about *here*, not just the *hereafter*.

Learning this has given me great joy that I long to share with those inside and outside the walls of a church. After winning *The Voice*, I’m now able to connect with all types of people from different parts of the country and world and offer them hope. This hope grew out of my family’s foundation and legacy of faith—both of which I am thankful for.



My family consisted of my dad and mom; my older brother, Chad; my younger sister, Holly; and me. We lived in a little

A-frame house on Mound Street. It was only two bedrooms. I shared a room with my brother, and when my younger sister was born, my dad and some friends opened up the attic for another bedroom.

During those childhood days, life was about riding our bikes to the creek, which was really just a ditch. There was a little playground at the end of our street. And for a real treat, we'd ride our bikes to the pharmacy where we'd get three or four scoops of ice cream for fifty cents.

My mom worked at a loan company that was near a video rental store, but Chad and I weren't allowed to cross the busy highway on our bikes to get to either place, though we tried a couple of times and got caught. My parents wanted us to wait for them to take us to the video store, where I'd usually rent my favorite movies, *Superman* and *The NeverEnding Story*.

My Granny Louise would come and pick us kids up in her white Ford Crown Victoria for Sunday-night or Wednesday-night church. If one of us came out with shorts on, she'd make us go back in and put pants on 'cause, you know, we were going to church. She always had friends she picked up along the way too—old ladies who smelled strong of flowers. Ladies who had little, but that didn't matter as long as they had Jesus. Even now I can remember the laugh of one widow, Sister Deshazier—it was like high little bells that would ring out through the car.

Back then, church seemed to be mostly about rules. Thinking about it now, though, I believe many of the rules came from the way I processed things, not necessarily what people told me. Growing up, I knew men wore long sleeves to church and women wore long dresses and didn't cut their hair. My Granny Louise and her friends were old guard, and around them things

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happened just so. Granny always sat on the front right side of the church, and I would sit with her every Sunday morning.

Every few weeks, it seemed, I'd be up front singing another special. The two songs I remember singing the most were "He Grew the Tree" and "God Likes People." If anyone ever grew tired of me singing those songs, they didn't let on.

I'd also sing with the other kids from Sunday school in a choir we called the Booster Band, maybe because we were all so tiny and needed to sit in booster seats. We'd sing, "Booster, Booster, be a Booster" to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" lyrics, "glory, glory, hallelujah." And then we'd sing another song like "Climb, Climb Up Sunshine Mountain" before going back out to sit with our families.

There was never an official church choir. Instead, when worship started, Pastor Evans would welcome the choir to come up, and whoever wanted to join could. This basically meant a whole group of people moved from the pews to the front of the church, and I was right there in the middle of them. And even if our singing wasn't completely enjoyable, everyone nodded along and applauded at the end because worshipping the Lord was the important part.

People always stopped by to see Granny when they needed help. And she really cared for everyone—those she knew well and those she didn't. If a friend's friend had an aunt whose cousin got killed, we'd go by the funeral home to pay our respects because that's how you showed love in a community like that. And Granny prayed for them all. She'd pray throughout the day, talking to God as if he were right there with her. Thanking him for things big and small. Her acknowledgment of his goodness rolled off her lips as naturally as breathing. Sometimes I wondered if she even realized she did it.

I clearly remember walking into church with my Granny Louise and looking at the white cross in the top of the arch above the door. I was probably four years old, and we sat on slatted pews, my feet swinging back and forth. Pastor Evans was my pastor for all of my growing-up years, and he and his wife, Sister Evans, lived across the street from the church.

There are two things I remember most about Sister Evans. First, she wore her black hair all piled up on her head, like most church ladies did back then. Second, she made the best coconut cake. And the way the cake was all piled up reminded me of her hair.

My dad didn't go to church much in my early years. He worked in the paint and wall-covering industry as an interior designer. He started out learning about painting and wall coverings, but then he got to the place where he could take a project from the drywall to a fully designed and decorated room.

He continued in the interior design business until 1987, and then—as he tells it—in a revival, God got ahold of his heart. This is what happened to my parents. Dad and Mom both knew there was going to be a shift and change in the life of our family, including Dad's work. This revival renewed Dad's desire to go into ministry, something he'd pushed to the side as he became an adult.

My dad tells the story of feeling like God had called him into ministry when he was twelve years old, but instead he got married and found a job that could support his growing family. When we moved into Granny's house, Dad could hear her words coming through the air-conditioning duct as she prayed that her

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family would get right with God. And she saw those prayers answered.

Dad started his schooling to become a minister and soon left his business. He followed the call to preach that had stirred within him when he was younger. God moved quickly, and soon Dad was asked to preach at revivals all over the Southeast.

He did this as an evangelist first, going from church to church speaking. Almost every weekend I'd go with him. Chad played baseball and Holly was too young, but I'd travel with my dad, and when he was done preaching, I'd sing.

Some weekends I didn't want to go, but I wanted to please my dad more and wanted to do the right thing. And I also enjoyed time with my dad. I appreciated the smile he gave me when people asked me to sing.

As we drove, I heard stories of my dad's grandmother, whom he'd never met. Lily Tilghman had raised ten kids alone—my grandfather, Big Daddy, being the oldest—after her husband died. Lily had been a woman preacher in Mississippi during a time when women preachers weren't popular at all. She'd travel by buckboard wagon to preach and serve. At least Dad and I could go by car.

We would travel from small country church to small country church, parking our car out on the white gravel lot in front. We'd sit in the front pew side by side. The congregation would sing songs from the same red-back hymnal, which was always interesting to me since not all the hymn books were red; some were green. Often the preacher would get up and say, "What do you want to sing?" A member of the congregation would call out the number of the hymn, and they'd all sing that.

Dad would preach, and sometimes he'd sing. I'd sing, too,

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handing my cassette-tape music to the person who took care of the sound. We'd stay over at the pastor's house, and after church we'd usually eat ham-and-cheese sandwiches and chips. Sometimes we'd be treated to Chinese food or Shoney's. Those were special days.

I remember once trying to start the truck for Dad, and I didn't know how a stick shift worked. I turned the key and the truck jumped forward into the back of another car. Thankfully church people are forgiving.

During the week I'd spend a lot of time with Granny while my mom and dad were at work. I can still remember her humming as she cooked. I started singing those hymns, too, around the house and as we drove down dirt roads, past fields and forests. Rarely a day passes when a hymn doesn't cross my lips. Even now I can hear the words of our choir director hollering out, "Turn to page three, three, three, 'I'll Fly Away.'"

Granny lived with us for the last three or four years of her life and worked as a seamstress to make money. Her sewing machine was music to me. The foot pedal would slow down and speed up to the cadence of the gospel songs on her lips.

I can still picture her laying out those thin, brown patterns and pinning them to the fabric. People would also bring her pants that needed to be hemmed and jackets to be taken out. It was how she made her money and also how she showed us kids her love. She made us outfits for holidays and costumes for school plays. Once Granny even sewed me a satin vampire's cape that was red on the inside and black on the outside. I can't help but smile thinking about that. Granny was full-on holiness; the fact that she sewed me a cape so I could be a vampire really shows a grandmother's love.

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Just like Daddy took me along to evangelistic meetings to sing, Granny took me along to “minister” to her friends, which was her fancy way of saying that I’d go along and sing. Singing was both entertainment and spiritual encouragement to Granny’s friends. I sang at nursing homes, church gatherings, and community events. I sang at women’s conferences and at senior events in the church’s fellowship hall. When I was nine, I won second place in a singing competition at the county fair.

In nursing homes, I’d follow Granny into the large common room where many of the residents would be gathered. I remember those rooms always smelled the same to me, like cafeteria lunch, probably because those common rooms were also where the meals were served.

Granny would talk to people and pray for them, and I’d follow along. Thin, frail hands would reach for me and take my hand in theirs. Even as a boy my heart would break as the elderly clung to me, asking me to stay and not wanting me to leave. They’d tell me that no one had come to see them, and my tears would come. Then Granny would ask me to sing, and I’d see smiles.

I remember the music of the church more than the preaching. Singing about hardships, people suffering, and the glory to come. For those two hours of church service, the saints in our congregation could forget all the troubles outside the doors. They sang about looking forward to heaven and finding hope there.

But as a kid, I didn’t have the same joy in knowing “when the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.” Because I heard a lot about hell, I was afraid of it, and I knew I didn’t want to go there. I constantly worried that I wasn’t going to do things good enough to get into heaven. I believed I had to walk the line to make God happy. There were certain standards I believed I had to keep.

Those feelings of not getting it right or not being good enough for folks are things I still struggle with. I tend to focus on the things that make me feel inadequate.

When I was a little bit older, but still a child, some of the formalities in the church relaxed a bit. Sitting next to the older ladies with their bunned hair were younger ones with frosted tips. Granny still wore long dresses, but my mom wore a skirt and suit jacket. Another big change was having a projector set up front, displaying lyrics on the wall. That's when praise and worship songs came in. The Hosanna! Music praise songs were the ones I liked most.

My happy, routine life changed one day when a family member picked me up at school. Chad, Holly, and I normally would have been on the bus with our redheaded bus driver, Mrs. Boday. Since we lived in a small enough town, it seemed like Mrs. Boday was everyone's bus driver—no matter where they lived—and she always dropped us off right in our driveway.

Instead of riding the bus, Becky picked us up. Becky was technically my cousin, but she seemed more like an aunt to me. Chad, Holly, and I rode quietly to Becky's house, and I knew something bad had happened—I just didn't know what. When we got there, we sat around a little round breakfast table and waited. My dad was out of town, but after a few minutes my mom came in. Her eyes were red and puffy.

"Kids, I have something to tell you. Granny died today. She's gone."

"No, she's not," I blurted out. "I just saw her." My chin quivered, and it made no sense. She couldn't be gone. She couldn't.

I thought about the last week. Granny had been in the hospital because she'd had an aneurysm, but she'd been doing better.

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My parents told us the doctors were just keeping her in the hospital for observation. We'd even gone to visit. As the days passed, I expected her to come home soon.

"The doctor said Granny was doing better," I added, still not believing this was possible. But from the sad look in my mom's eyes, I knew it was true. Over the next few days, all types of people came over to our house, bringing food and meat trays.

It was a hard blow losing Granny. Pastor Evans spoke at her funeral, and the church was filled with people from near and far. As a seamstress, she had known a lot of people who dropped by with items for her to sew or alter. Granny would offer them a chair and a cup of instant coffee. She'd pray with them too. Some people would call, and she'd pray with them over the phone. I'd often hear her praying for all their needs when she was alone in her room. But now she was gone.

When we got back to our house after the funeral, most of the church people followed us there. Where we live in the South, if someone passes away, all the cars converge at a family member's house. People bring food and stacks of casserole dishes.

I couldn't handle all the people, knowing the reason they were there. I ran outside and sat by a tree in the backyard. I just didn't want to believe that Granny was gone. I couldn't face it.

It's not like I hadn't dealt with death before. Once, I remember Granny and I had gone to pay our respects to the family of a little girl who'd been hit by a car. She'd had long, red braids, and everyone had been so sad. But this time it was different. It was someone I loved dearly who was gone.

I still didn't want it to be real, and I remember humming the tune of *The NeverEnding Story* theme song. Even then I couldn't stop the heartache.

When I was fourteen, we moved to Meridian, Mississippi, and that year I tried out for a local singing group called the Merrystreet Players. The audition was at the Grand Opera House in Meridian, but back then the building was in disrepair. At the audition, everyone just got onstage and sang a few lines a cappella, but I was prepared. I had a cassette tape to sing “Wind Beneath My Wings,” which I had sung at weddings and other events. It wasn’t a Christian song, but it was an inspiring one. I was drawn to songs like that. I laugh now, thinking back on how everyone had gotten up and sung a few lines a cappella but I went above and beyond and did a full production. It earned me a spot in the group, and we traveled to other schools in the area to perform.

As a teenager, I didn’t think becoming a popular singer on non-Christian radio stations was a possibility. I wasn’t in Hollywood or Nashville. I had a good voice, but I didn’t have a pop-star type of personality. I was a chubby teen who sang in church and whom old ladies loved. I believed people expected me to do a certain thing with my music, and I did.

Brooke tells me that my role in my family was being the responsible kid. I wasn’t one to make a fuss when asked to serve in church. People counted on me. And it’s not like I didn’t enjoy serving. Looking back, I can see that so much of my service as a pastor had its beginnings in my upbringing. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve sung at the bedside of the sick and the dying. When my heart is breaking to see someone hurting or in pain, the best thing I know to do is sing. Holding somebody’s hand and singing a favorite song brings that person peace, even with a hard diagnosis or struggling breaths.

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Around the time I auditioned for *The Voice*, I sang by the side of a dear saint from the church. I'd sing favorite hymns, and then she'd always ask me to sing "You're Nobody till Somebody Loves You," an old Dean Martin song from the 1940s. Her face would light up as I sang. I've realized over time that good songs stir emotion. There is a lot more music beyond hymns or Christian songs that can help people smile.

As I sat by this woman's side, she'd tell me about the flowers and the birds she saw as she peered into heaven, and then she'd share what she'd had for lunch. As she hovered between this world and the next, I wondered if my songs mixed with those of the angels—maybe they even sang along.

At age seventeen, I became the worship pastor at our church. It was while I led worship, even as a teen, that I felt most connected to God—most alive. The experience was different from singing for the Merrystreet Players. It was more than just carrying a tune or singing an uplifting song like "Wind Beneath My Wings." Leading worship was not about the audience or about my voice. I saw God working through me in ways that were beyond myself.

During my teen years, my parents and our church had started reaching out to those who were hurting, broken, and struggling with addictions. The congregation grew as it filled with people who felt they were at the end of their ropes and needed God desperately.

By eighteen, I was a youth leader too. And that's when things really started to change. I can't pinpoint when, but around this age singing became more than about the songs. I connected with God in the music, and I helped others do the same.

When my dad tells about those days, he gets choked up sharing how during the singing and worship time people would come

to the front of the church for prayer, to repent of their sins, or to dedicate their lives to God. They didn't wait for the sermon or the altar call invitation to come up to the front. Instead, through the times when I led worship, God reached them, and they rushed to the front.

Music was an escape from the hard stuff of life for me too. I was starting in ministry, but I was still a teenage boy. I wanted to serve God. I knew then, as I know now, that we are called to live a righteous life. That means having morals and virtues. It means being honorable and following God's ways as best as we know how. So, as a teenager at school, I didn't feel I could hang out with friends a lot, because I knew I shouldn't do the things they were doing, like listening to certain music or watching certain movies. There were friends who had drinking parties, and I went to one or two of those. But over time, especially after I started leading worship at church, I really tried to stick to the straight and narrow. At times I felt isolated from my peers—not all of them, but a lot of them.

When I started dating Brooke, she also pushed the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable by the older crowd, like wearing pants to statewide church functions. Things like that would cause eyebrows to raise. And once, when she had sprayed glitter all over her hair—just being a teenager, just being funky—our friend told her that her hair needed to get saved. He was sort of joking, but sort of not. For a time, I even felt like I loved Brooke more than God, so I broke up with her.

After high school graduation, I started taking college classes and struggling with the work. It wasn't easy, and I didn't see how it would help my future—not when I had goals to serve God and work in the church.

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Realizing I didn't want to do the college route, I started working on becoming ordained in the Church of God and became a pastoral intern within our church. That's when I started comparing myself to the older men of God I knew in ministry. They were dynamic preachers. Their messages were insightful and moving, while I felt my sermons were more plain and practical. These pastors and leaders also stood in front of the church in pressed pants and starched shirts. They were more dignified in their delivery and their dress, and I wished I could be like that. But it didn't fit who I was. When I first started leading worship, I wore a tie, but I was a khaki pants and button-up shirt type of guy. As I started being myself, the expectations of how I needed to dress eased up, both within church leadership and within myself.

Yet, through all these struggles and pressures, the comparisons and worries slipped away when I sang. Music was my special bond with an eternal God.

In the years I'd been our church's worship pastor, the lyrics weren't just ones I was repeating; they became my own. I could feel them deep down. The songs moved from my head and my lips to my heart and my soul. My feet started moving, too, not because it looked good onstage but because I couldn't *not move*. It didn't matter how I looked; the music bubbled up, and my feet bounced until it seemed like I was dancing six inches off the ground. Sometimes tears came as I sang. Other times laughter. The words were more than just words; they started to reflect my relationship with God.

While the world around me was still watermelon slices on the front porch, blackberries in a bucket, and breezes through the cottonwood trees, within the church walls a different breeze was blowing. It was God's Spirit.

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Like leaves quivering in my gut, music became the way God's goodness plopped like sunshine rays in the center of my being. I wish Granny could have seen that—not only the boy who grinned as he sang in front of the church but also the man who couldn't stop smiling as he sang, even when life was hard.



When I look back at my childhood, I can see that God used me even during times when I felt I didn't measure up. This was true when I was on *The Voice* too. Every time I got a yes, I'd thought it was going to be a no. Every time. So the surprise and the joy were very real when I kept getting chosen, kept getting a yes.

When I look for the wins, I see that God's ability to use us is greater than our doubts. I've had so many people send me messages, telling me how my joy displayed on *The Voice* was exactly what they needed during the hard season of a worldwide pandemic, when so many familiar things—like going to school, work, and church—were stripped away. The good news is that this joy isn't something exclusive to me.

Maybe God's been following you through the cotton fields, the muddy waters, and the rhythm of trains on firefly nights like he did me. Or maybe he's been following you through skyscrapers, expansive bridges, and crowded sidewalks. Either way, consider how your childhood provided a foundation for your faith. Do you see any wins there?

For some of you, that foundation may be strong. For others, nonexistent. But from this moment things can be different. Whether you sing a song to God or just listen to one, consider music as a time to connect with him. Your Father is ready and

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willing to connect with your heart. Trust in his goodness and you just might find that joy bubbling up inside you too.

When we fail and fall short, it may be hard to worship and sing to God. Anything we try to earn or do will always leave us feeling unworthy. But thank God worship is not about our goodness; it's about his. Every note. Every song. And that is one great win we can all count on.

WINS FOR TODAY

- ✓ We win when we can look back at our childhoods and see glimpses of the unique talents and gifts that God gave us.
- ✓ We win when we thank God for the special people in our lives.
- ✓ We win when we notice how God's been with us through the years—through the good times and the hard ones.
- ✓ We win when we remember prayers answered over the years—our prayers and the prayers of others.
- ✓ We win when we slow down and use music as a way to connect with God. When we worship God, we lift our eyes off our problems and instead gaze at his goodness. We are reminded that God is with us, just as he's always been.