

HELD





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*to be
comforted*

*to be
loved*

to be ...

HELD

Leslie Haskin
9-11 SURVIVOR

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First, there is God my Father.

Over the past few years I have been through the fire. There have been dark nights and difficult questions—sometimes more questions than answers. But in the face of doubt, I've gained greater insight from being in the presence of God. He is everything to me.

This book was made possible because His wisdom placed me in the pews of a church with a mission of healing and in the care of my pastor, John Torres, and his wife, Shannon, who teach God's love and lead by example. Thank you.

Thank you also to my brother and friend, Pastor Lawrence Haskin, whose many words of wisdom, teachings, and encouragement can be found throughout these pages. You are incredible.

In the face of my many questions, fears, and a healing journey that sometimes seemed impossible, all of you were there. Therefore, I dedicate this book to your work and your mission fields: Goodwill Church in Montgomery, New York, and Household of Faith Church in Markham, Illinois.

Continue in God's grace . . .

INTRODUCTION

Father,

It is again with great expectation that I come to You this night. I ask only that Your healing words flood these pages and that Your unparalleled greatness brings peace. Pour out Your Holy Spirit, Father, for deliverance in the lives of those who suffer still from tragedy, disappointment, and heartbreak. Restore hope in situations we might interpret as hopeless. Lift our visions higher than our circumstances, so that Your glory is revealed; let Your will be done. Bring healing, Father, and bring peace. I ask for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven alone. Amen.

Hurricane Katrina was one of our nation's worst natural disasters. The loss of life and destruction still seem immeasurable. My heartfelt sympathy goes out to the countless survivors who lost their loved ones, their homes, their possessions, their mementos, and all that was familiar to them.

I also remain faithful in my prayers for the victims of Hurricane Rita, the Rwandan genocide, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

It is these events and others that motivated me to pen words of encouragement once more.

I believe that God is amazing in what He will use to touch

our hearts and free us, and I'm honored that He allowed me to step forward in that regard.

Even today, I find myself acknowledging His dominion all over again. When I consider my life and all that I have survived, the veil is lifted. For what I once thought to be the end of my story actually became the beginning.

Who would have thought that after a successful climb up the corporate ladder to a six-figure income, a beautiful home, and all the benefits that "my world" afforded me, terror would strike? Who could have foreseen my great fall and subsequent landing amid the muck and the mire of mental illness, homelessness, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and inability to explain my sudden exile from the world?

Nevertheless, these pages go beyond just me.

Held is everybody's story.

It is an exhaustive look at the daily struggles of survivors whose lives have been crushed by the weight of murder, cancer, AIDS, terror, and natural disaster. Those left hyperventilating and wondering about the mercies of God.

It is a deep dive into the uncertainties of spirituality and fear, in order to retrieve a message of hope—that all who enter here might come to know the essential Jesus Christ—so for the next few hours, days, or even weeks of your attention you might understand what is the hope of His calling. My contributions to the Kingdom then move beyond simply remembering each September after September, into the realm of imparting hope beyond what seems hopeless and declaring the good news to those who might not have otherwise believed.

The good news: No matter the life-shattering circumstance that delivers the devastating blow to our spirit, God is bigger. He is faithful and unchanging, merciful and consistent with His offer to us, that through it all, we will be comforted, we will be loved, we will be *Held*. You are confronted again and again with the choice of letting God speak or letting your wounded self cry out. Although there has to be a place where you can allow your wounded part to get the attention it needs, your vocation is to speak from the place in you where God dwells.

—HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

CHAPTER 1

ONCE UPON A TIME

When Towers Fall

I woke up one late-summer morning, and the rain was falling. The thunder rolled gently at times, and the air was thick with humidity. Somewhere off in the distance, every now and then, a quick flash of light came near and startled me. Normally, on a day like this one, I'd stay in bed with the rain and drift in and out of sleep patterns brought on by the melodic arrangement of raindrops falling on my windows. However, this day was different. It was annoying. It interfered with my plans.

It was Friday morning. It had been a long, stressful week, and

I was looking forward to a day of relaxing. I had started on Sunday cleaning my new home in preparation for the move-in, which took three full days. Moving my belongings into the house from the storage unit that I'd rented earlier that summer took two more days, and I hadn't even started unpacking boxes. I was exhausted.

My plan was to take a full day, sit alone in front of the nearby water's edge, and take inventory of where God had brought me. I'd enjoy a picnic and a time of prayerful meditation reflecting back on the long summer I'd spent being homeless, enduring a long list of calamities, suffering due losses, and surviving frequent panic attacks.

I'd sit by the water. I'd tell God of my complete surrender to His will, and then He'd renew my strength. It was the perfect plan. Prescription to my mind. It would take place at the only place a peaceful revival could happen—at the water's edge.

Hours passed, the rain kept falling, and my frustration grew. I stood at my front door watching the drowning grass until suddenly, I recalled God's promise. Specifically, His Word declares that by faith we could move mountains. *Wow, what if. . . ?* I thought.

My mind raced through the Word of God, collecting all that I could remember about faith. Every Scripture served to feed the flame of anticipation as I considered the implication of that promise. "Supped up" in minutes by the possibilities, I braced myself to move the rain. I collected all the authority that my voice could muster and started telling the rain to stop—"In Jesus' name, stop raining," I shouted, with authority. I could even feel myself getting all emotional about it. Tears came to my eyes, my fists got tighter as I pounded them in the air, and you know what—it kept raining. In fact, I think that's about the time that the once-subtle rain was officially upgraded to a tropical storm. It fell in torrents.

Finally and sadly, after a few more loud commands to the unresponsive downpour, I gave up. I took my picnic blanket out

of the basket that I'd placed it in, spread it across the floor in my then-empty house, and sat near the window and cried.

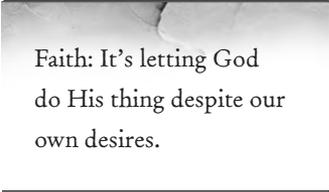
I was convinced that God was once again getting it wrong. "How could You, God? How could You ignore my needs in this way? You said that You would supply all of my needs according to all that You have. Yet, here I am, completely spent, and You deny me rest. What does this mean? What have I done wrong to You?"

My spirit, just in sheer gloom, collapsed to the floor. I don't know exactly how long I kvetched before the Lord before I fell asleep to the sound of the falling rain. Newly formed and gentle breezes met me there underneath the window, and I do believe I snored.

I woke a few hours later to the dripping of the final raindrops and the smell of rain in the air. The sun was going down, and the sky was a magnificent orange. Crickets were chirping, and moisture had settled on the ledge. I reveled in it. Looking around at the beauty and richness of what the rain had produced, I quickly realized what God had done. I understood what *faith* really means. Faith is letting God do His thing despite our own desires. It's allowing Him to give us those things that we have need of . . . in the way that He knows to be best. Faith is about trusting beyond what our eyes can see and what our situations dictate.

I asked the Lord to stop the rain so that I could pack a bag, drive to a nearby lake, and have a picnic that I thought would give me some much-needed time of quiet and rest. He brought the rain down harder so that I could just stop—be still even—sit quietly near the window, be lulled by the soothing sound of the rain, and be "quieted" to rest.

Life is like that sometimes, I think. We will often find ourselves in situations that we cannot plan our way out of and in places that we never planned to be in to begin with. We find that even



Faith: It's letting God do His thing despite our own desires.

with all of our best-laid plans and careful attention to detail, life is still beyond our control.

I learned a small bit of that lesson six years ago. And, as I reflect back, comparing what I know now, I must admit, I am still learning. Even so, I remember it like it was yesterday—September 11, 2001.

I woke that morning as I did every other weekday, dressed in my designer finest and all my arrogance, and was off to my executive position atop Tower One of the World Trade Center.

I remember that the day was particularly beautiful. The birds were singing, and the air was filled with the fragrance of freshly cut grass. The sky was a brilliant blue, and the sun cast a magnificent yellow glow over the earth. The mountains near my home seemed to capture sunlight and cast iridescent shadows over my backyard.

I wanted to play hooky from work that day and relax in the beauty of the mountains where I lived. Instead, I took the two-hour train ride into New York City, as I did every morning, to my office on the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh floors of Tower One.

I arrived in the usual eight o'clock hour, which, according to building standards, was a little late. Most people were already in their offices and working by that time. After reading a few e-mails and having my usual cranberry muffin and hazelnut coffee, I walked over to my assistant's desk to get some answers to a problem that, the night before, had escalated to my level.

My assistant's desk was directly in front of the window.

As I stood talking with her, midsentence and without warning, thunder literally crashed into the building. I heard it and felt it simultaneously. It came from around us, beneath us, and on top of us at the same time. Items rolled off the desks, lights flickered, and windows exploded. Loud bangs resonated from all over the office while people were running and screaming and looking for a passable way out. In only seconds, the ceiling above us was beginning to buckle, and fire was escaping through once obscure seams in the ceiling.

I just stood there in front of that window, frozen in time as my universe collapsed around me. I stood there staring at what five minutes before was a gorgeous view of the city—now forever darkened by falling body parts, furniture, paper, and debris banging against the sides of the building. I felt a warm stream of water run down the inside of my leg.

I stood there for a few minutes desperately trying to collect what remained of my mind and really understand what was happening. Instead, being completely absent from my body, I followed the crowd down thirty-six floors of smoke and blood and body parts and explosions and a fire so angry and intense that it charred even the concrete that was once our playground.

By the time I reached the concourse level where we escaped the building, I was literally stepping over decapitated human remains and witnessing torn pieces of flesh splattered across the remaining glass where my friends and colleagues jumped or fell or were pushed from the upper floors. I can still see them falling.

What was left of my mind was lost in those moments. What was once my lost soul was recovered by God.

In the months that followed, I suffered a mental breakdown and was diagnosed with severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. When I recalled the events of that day, I spoke with a severe stutter. I boarded my windows with thick shutters and was afraid that the Taliban were living in the shed in my backyard. I stayed awake for days at a time holding on to weapons that I'd placed near my bed. I couldn't go in my basement for fear that the ceiling would collapse on top of me, and going anywhere other than a corner store was impossible. My prognosis was not good. The doctors thought that I would never return to a productive state of mind.

Then one night, when there was nothing bigger than my fears and anxiety, God sent a tiny miracle to my bedside and restored my soul. I'll tell you more about that later.

It's interesting for me now, looking back at what I was before

September 11 and seeing what God has birthed in me since that day. My life, even from my own eyes, is an amazing witness of God's grace and healing powers.

As I began my journey of healing, I began to know God, and I let Him know me. For the first time in my life, I honestly shared my whole self with my Father, and it changed me from the inside.

Under the light of His eyes, I have learned the truth about life. It is, in its true nature, endlessly compassionate, beautiful, peaceful, and full of joy and love. It is also chaos and confusion, sickness, death, pain, and tragedy. It is what I now know to be an all-encompassing journey, no part of which is in our control.

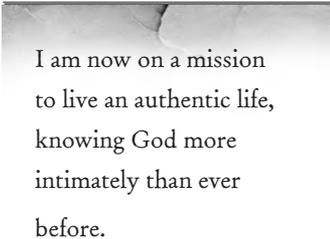
Knowing what I know, I have to believe that God sees our darkest nights and knows exactly how to bring light to every situation. Our quiet rain and individual storms do not shake Him, and falling towers don't catch Him by surprise. He is God, and our lives and all the details of our lives, big and small, are but the unfolding of His eternal purpose, even when it rains. Our lives are all part of one huge, comprehensive plan to return us to the original place of intent.

I am now on a mission to live that plan more completely. To embrace it and live an authentic life, knowing God more intimately than ever before. To speak His truth and not my own. And as I come to know Him more, I am empowered to live the "all encompassing" parts of life and His great plan in complete surrender to them.

I am learning, relearning, and then learning again how to place all of who I am—the good and the bad—at the foot of the cross and leave it there. I'm learning and

relearning to speak my requests to God and then listen to what it is that I need.

Over the past several months, I have met many people on this



I am now on a mission to live an authentic life, knowing God more intimately than ever before.

road to enlightenment, this road to Damascus. I have heard many stories of healing, revelation, and personal encounters with Christ. Though the stories vary at some point, each began on a normal day doing normal things. Each of us experienced the trauma to our core, on levels that we didn't even know existed within our hearts, and then we saw the light. Each of us found it difficult, if not impossible, to surrender each layer, one layer at a time, probing through the whys and the hows, before we were transformed.

How sweet is the journey when accompanied by Him? How bearable is the road when He leads?

Yet, even as I walk steadfastly in life near Him, life keeps happening. I am amazed at the situations I find myself in after planning and sweating for a specific result, or after "telling" God how to give to me or what He should do in order to provide for my needs. I'm even more amazed to discover, now that He's redeemed me, what my needs really were. So much so that I am investing and trusting in God's grace, which is the flavor of future expectation.

Follow me as I follow Christ.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leslie Haskin achieved great success at Kemper Insurance Company in New York City. She became the Director of Operations and one of the only two African Americans to hold an executive title within the corporation's eastern region.

But 9-11 changed her priorities. In addition to her career, Leslie spends her time in the inner city spreading the message of hope to the homeless and otherwise lost. She is the founder of a ministry designed to provide rehabilitation and healing to women and children who are homeless and victims of domestic violence.

Leslie has appeared at several memorials honoring the victims and survivors of 9-11. She lives in upstate New York.