

“PRACTICAL, WITTY, AND DOWNRIGHT INSPIRATIONAL.”

— Craig and Amy Groeschel

SLAYING THE DEBT DRAGON

*How one family conquered their money monster
and found an inspired happily ever after*

CHERIE LOWE



Long live the Queen of Free! Practical, witty, and downright inspirational, Cherie's debt-slaying book will lead you out of the dark pit of debt dragons to a place of hope and financial freedom with "been-there, don't-do-that" wisdom.

CRAIG AND AMY GROESCHEL

Founders of LifeChurch.tv

In today's world, financial choices we thought would bring happiness often turn into chains that keep us from experiencing the freedom that is ours through Jesus. Cherie Lowe will give you the practical tips, tools, and encouragement you need to break the bondage of financial burdens and discover how to live a truly abundant, joyful life.

HOLLEY GERTH

Bestselling author of *You're Going to Be Okay*

The tentacles of debt don't just burrow into pocketbooks and bank accounts, they entangle our relationships, our attitudes, and our hearts. This fresh look at living debt-free once and for all is compelling, inspiring, and practical. You can't afford not to buy this book.

MARGARET FEINBERG

Author of *Wonderstruck* and *Fight Back With Joy*

If you've ever had a panic attack trying to develop a budget, wanted to get out of debt but don't know where to start, or said the words, "I'm just not a numbers person," then you need to read this book today. Cherie Lowe is a kind companion for a difficult journey. She helps you make peace with your pocketbook as you learn to see the beauty in a budget, and she does it with wisdom, grace, and a light heart.

EMILY P. FREEMAN

Author of *A Million Little Ways*

Cherie Lowe's incredible story of conquering her family's debt dragon is inspiring, entertaining, and filled with hope. Through practical tips and her own personal battle tales, you'll be reminded that financial freedom is indeed possible.

CLAIRE DIAZ-ORTIZ

Author and Silicon Valley innovator

A plethora of words come to mind after reading this incredible book: insightful, honest, practical, challenging, wise, and useful. Cherie Lowe tells her saga with humor, guts, and raw transparency. It is a story that will encourage you to face your own debt dragon with hope and determined courage.

KURT W. BUBNA

Pastor and author of *Epic Grace*

Slaying the Debt Dragon is an approachable guide to ridding your life of unnecessary debt. Not only are the debt-slaying strategies practical and doable, but the advice comes from a family who truly experienced the journey toward financial freedom. Cherie helps her readers set aside the guilt and shame of living in debt and gives a step-by-step guide to getting out of debt into financial freedom. There is no way that you cannot save money after reading this. For those struggling with debt, this book is filled with hope for a better life ahead. I can't recommend it highly enough!

AMY ALLEN CLARK

Author of *The Good Life for Less* and MomAdvice.com

Slaying the Debt Dragon is an honest, freeing, and entirely refreshing read. Cherie's story inspired me to reevaluate the way I view and spend money. Her wisdom is hard won, and is told with bold, witty authenticity.

MARY DeMUTH

Author of *The Wall Around Your Heart*

The humility and vulnerability revealed by Cherie in *Slaying the Debt Dragon* are refreshing and inviting. She has invited the world into her life by giving us a “look under the hood” of what it takes for the power of debt to lose its sting in our lives. By the end of this book, you’ll be encouraged to press on to your own financial freedom because of her nonglamorous, authentically simple, and realistic journey that she has invited us to join.

RYAN JOHNSON

Lead Pastor of New City Church, Lawrenceville, Georgia

I read Cherie’s story with my jaw dropped to the floor. The amount of debt she and her husband acquired is astounding, but the short amount of time in which they put their debt to death is astonishing and inspiring. Through her story and experience, Cherie will give *you* the practical steps you need to take to walk yourself right on up to the dragon and sling your sword into its mouth. She’ll encourage you, give you hope, and hold your hand as you journey out of debt and into a life of financial freedom and wealth acquisition. Now, grab your sword and raise it with her . . . because she’s about to teach you how to slay your debt dragon!

ERIN CHASE

Author of The \$5 Dinner Mom Cookbook series

I’ve known Cherie and Brian Lowe since before they slayed their debt dragons. The freedom they enjoy now comes from employing the principles and advice that Cherie generously shares in this book. They’re not just theories and platitudes but tried and true principles and habits that turned things around for the Lowes. The good news is that the information Cherie offers really works and can make all the difference in your financial future. Follow Cherie on this adventure—you won’t regret it.

BRODIE TAPHORN

Associate pastor of Upper Arlington Lutheran Church, Columbus, Ohio

Cherie has given us two amazing gifts: motivation and direction! Throughout the book, you will hear Cherie's spunky voice proclaiming, "You can do it!" Many good resources tell you how to "eat the elephant" and even where to begin. But if knowing "how to" was enough, we would all be millionaires! In order to begin, we must believe the end of debt-free is truly possible. Out of the ashes of her family's own financial mistakes and despair, Cherie confidently says, "We did it, and you can too!" Prepare to be encouraged and empowered!

MICHAEL NAVE

Lead Pastor of Cornerstone Church, Marion, Illinois

With flair, candor, and humor, Cherie Lowe offers a field-tested plan to turn your finances around. Her real-life story, strategies, and no-nonsense advice will help you find the freedom you've been dreaming of.

SCOT LONGYEAR

Pastor of Maryland Community Church, Terre Haute, Indiana

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Introduction

Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.

PARAPHRASE OF A QUOTE BY G. K. CHESTERTON¹

BEING IN DEBT is a lot like being in the dark.

I'm not talking about bedtime dark, where you can still see a stream of light from the moon or the gentle glow of a night-light in the hallway. No, being in debt is like sitting alone in darkness so pitch-black, so completely devoid of light, that you finally squeeze your eyes tightly shut, praying when you open them there will be some glow, even if it's just the faintest illumination.

Then there is the isolation. When you feel hopelessly in debt, lies like these creep into your head:

No one could have made *this* many mistakes.

No one else could feel *this* out of control.

No one could have been *that* dumb with their money.

No one else could have let a credit card balance spiral dizzily beyond reach (even though you were using it *only* for emergencies). No one else could have felt the pressure to keep up with others by spending money that was not her own. No one could feel this scared about not having a secure future. No one else could be under this kind of pressure.

So lonely. So in the dark.

You are *not* the only one struggling to escape the darkness of debt, even excessive debt. A great number of people have shared their lonely stories with me—either on my blog or in person—over the past five and a half years. A lot of them are slaying debt dragons right now or at least trying to figure out what weapons to use to begin the battle. And some have fought and won their battles already. There is actually a large community of people who make hard choices to get out of debt and spend less than they make every day.

But back to those feelings of darkness. When those “no one else could have” statements float around in your brain, you begin to believe the lie that you really are the only one who has this nasty debt problem. Then the gloom you’re stumbling around in creeps into your very soul, along with its partners in crime, shame and guilt.

That darkness will keep you from sharing your story, preventing you from getting the help you need to get out of debt. It will also hinder you from offering hope to others who are on the same path, feeling just as alone as you do. Darkness is an evil fiend—a dragon, if you will—that casts some sort of spell paralyzing us all.

In the beginning, it was difficult for my husband, Brian, and me to “go public” with our story. I mean, come on—we haven’t always been the people who have paid off \$127,482.30 in debt. Back in April 2008, we were the people who *had* \$127K+ of debt. It’s much easier to share your story when you have kicked a few debt dragons in the teeth than when you have one (or twelve) breathing fire down your back.

And that’s why I committed to continuing to tell our story, even after there was victory. Because I know what it’s like to feel alone and in the dark.

You are not alone. Cast out the darkness and tell your story. Be honest with yourself and others about your finances so you can begin the path to victory over debt. Get the help and hope that you need to begin defeating your own debt dragons.

You see, the first step to getting out of debt doesn't involve elaborate spreadsheets. Honestly, it isn't about cutting up your credit cards, either. It's not even establishing an emergency fund. No, the first step is simply to lift your eyes up and believe that the *dragons can be beaten*.

If you'll allow me, I'd like to use the next few hours of your time to convince you that you can slay your debt dragon, no matter how ferocious, no matter how daunting in size and stature. Maybe you'll see a bit of yourself in our story. Maybe you'll discover that your attitudes about money have landed you in a dark financial dungeon. Maybe you'll realize that your spouse is not someone to battle against when it comes to finances, but instead your greatest ally and debt-slaying partner. Maybe this journey of gaining control of your money will actually bring the two of you closer together than you ever dreamed or imagined. And maybe you'll pick up a quick money-saving tip or two, which Brian and I either learned from our mistakes or gained during four long years of scaling back our lifestyle so we could pay off our huge debt.

Slaying the Debt Dragon isn't a quick fix. All worthwhile endeavors take time. It's not a complicated, smarty-pants economic treatise either. The steps I outline are practical and actually simple to follow if you dedicate yourself to the great quest of paying off those bills. Eliminating debt has less to do with the dollars in your pocket or the score on your IQ test than you realize. Stepping into financial freedom requires small, simple, gradual changes made over time and with resolve. I hope you'll allow me to guide you on your journey by outlining the changes we made and showing how we stuck to those changes even when we felt challenged or overwhelmed.

Eliminating debt has less to do with the dollars in your pocket than with small, simple, gradual changes made over time and with resolve.

For many years, our debt isolated us—from each other, from others with the same struggle, from God’s best for our lives. Hook, line, and sinker, Brian and I bought the lie that we were alone. That lie prevented us from doing and being so many things. We lacked peace. We lacked unity. We lacked generosity. We lacked hope. I wish I could look you in the eyes and plead with you now to reject that lie. Don’t choose isolation and entrapment. Don’t choose the dark. Choose community and freedom. Through the words of this book, I pray you can begin the well-lit path to freedom.

Hans Christian Andersen said, “Every person’s life is a fairy tale written by God’s fingers.” God wants to tell a story through my life. God wants to tell a story through your life. He even wants to tell it through your bank account. I want to invite you into my family’s story, to hear our battle tales and to see the weapons we used to defeat our dragons. However, even more than that, I want you to step into your own story. Have hope that God can deliver you from debt and that He cares about every hair on your head and every penny in the bank. If He can keep the universe from spinning out of control, He can certainly handle the fact that you have amassed more financial obligations than you would care to admit on your Facebook status. He will provide for you if you take His hand and trust Him.

Our story is not your story. I have a feeling I will want to hear your story someday, because it is designed uniquely for who you are and the plan God has for *your* life.

Step into your story. Your financial happily ever after can begin today.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

JOHN 1:5, ESV

Chapter 1

ONCE UPON A TIME

Change is painful. Few people have the courage to seek out change. Most people won't change until the pain of where they are exceeds the pain of change.

DAVE RAMSEY, *The Total Money Makeover*

ONCE UPON A TIME . . . every great story has one. No matter the “happily ever after” or the many details in between, it simply wouldn’t be a great tale without a “once upon a time.” This is my family’s once upon a time. Honestly, though, our story is fairly ordinary rather than fairy-tale extraordinary. However, I often need to answer the “How in the world did you end up with \$127,000 in debt?” question before I dive into the methods we used to eliminate it. So without further ado:

Once upon a time . . .

Fresh out of college and married for only a month, Brian and I moved to a new city so he could begin law school. We were both unemployed and incredibly clueless about finances. We were living on love and chips and salsa from Chi-Chi’s, which was the restaurant nearest to our less-than-luxury apartment. I landed a job working

full-time for a church while Brian went to school, clerking whenever his schedule allowed. For the next three years, most days seemed to follow that same pattern: Work. Chi-Chi's. School. Repeat. We didn't live recklessly. We didn't buy a million-dollar home. We didn't wear designer clothes. Due to the hectic nature of higher education and church ministry (okay, we were also lazy, and I really liked seafood enchiladas), we had a serious dining-out problem, but overall we weren't wild with our resources.

Our main plan for our finances, though, was not having a plan. Chalk it up to newlywed ignorance or a lack of financial literacy or that we were still living more like children than adults. But that lack of a plan was our first big mistake, and after a while it caught up with us. The brakes would go out on the car. *Pull out the Visa!* When we didn't have enough cash to go out with friends for dinner? *Well, hello there, my little plastic compadre.* Doctor's visit? *Guess we should charge it. I mean, we have to go, right?*

Eventually, Brian finished law school and found a good job. A couple of months later, I gave birth to Anna, our amazing first daughter who turned our hearts inside out. I quit my job to stay home with her, so we never even got the chance to fall into "the two-income trap."¹ We bought a house. In the eyes of the world, we were living the American dream. Graduated from college? Check. Married? Check. Law school, baby, home owners? Check, check, and check. These were all things that we were supposed to do as young adults. We were nailing this grown-up thing.

Then the student loans came due. We deferred them.

They came due again.

It seems a bit astonishing to me now that we continued to live without any real financial planning for the next five years. We celebrated birthdays and anniversaries. We wished each other Merry Christmas. I went to graduate school, and when Anna was a toddler, I took on a part-time job at a different church. We went on vacations.

We bought a new car. Life moved along as it often does, in the day-to-day of grocery shopping and laundry, holidays, and weekends.

Don't get me wrong. Brian and I weren't living in a stress-free, la-di-da world. While we loved each other and even enjoyed our lives as a small family, there was this underlying tension that I can't quite describe. There were no big blowup fights about money. But there was an occasional angst-filled, passive-aggressive moment or two along the way. *Did we really need that? You bought what?* Brian and I rarely discussed how much was in the bank, let alone any goals for our finances.

Enter the part of me that wishes I could sensationalize our story for you. I once was asked if I had bought something I loved in every color and maxed out our credit cards on designer shoes. That's simply not me. I wish I could tell you that we went on some killer vacation with beautiful ocean vistas and a pricey, high-flying skydiving experience. Didn't happen. Did we buy a yacht? Nope. How about an RV? Nope. Did we take our kids to Disney World every week? month? year? Nope, nope, and nope. Did we have awesome computers and smartphones and amazing technology in our home? Uh-uh. Was our house a McMansion? *Pbfff.*

Aside from the mortgage on our home—a small and very modest 1950s brick ranch—our debt consisted of what most people would consider run-of-the-mill expenses. Oddly enough, approximately ten months before we launched into our debt-slaying journey, I was contemplating returning to work full-time. In my mind, employment would help us “get ahead” financially, and Anna was ready to begin kindergarten anyway. We could relieve some of the pressure we were feeling and maybe be able to afford a few of the extras so many friends seemed to regularly enjoy. Then unexpectedly I discovered I was pregnant, and everything changed. God had blessed us with new life.

He'd also given us another reason to think seriously about how to dig ourselves out of debt, which was comprised primarily of four large

obligations. We owed close to \$89,000 in combined student loans, including my husband's undergrad and graduate school debt as well as a loan from one semester of my collegiate experience. (Thanks, Mom and Dad, for covering the other seven semesters!)

Then we owed over \$16,500 on one major credit card. Again, I wish we had something to show for it. But there's no killer house addition, no walk-in closet filled with stylish clothes, no four-wheelers or vacation photos. We simply nicked-and-dimed our way into five figures of debt—spent to cover household repairs, groceries, small gifts, dining out, new brakes and tires for the car, all very *boring* stuff.

We also had a car loan to the tune of about \$12,000. Our vehicle was quite modest by our reckless standards, so we'll call that one a grace-filled "oops."

The final piece was the medical debt. In mid-March 2008, our second daughter, Zoe, made her arrival. She brought life, grace, and energy into our lives. She also brought a big heap of medical bills amounting to \$5,700. We hadn't planned on that either.

On top of these four major obligations were a few minor debts like a \$2,200 root canal for me (that was no fun *and* expensive), \$1,000 in furniture we had purchased on a payment plan, \$100 on a department store card, and interest paid along the way.

While not so glamorous, these debts totaled well over \$127,000, a figure that typically makes people's eyes bulge bigger than Homer Simpson's when I share it with them.

I nearly passed out myself when Brian first showed me the bottom-line debt total. It wasn't during a serious moment at the kitchen table or even during a budget meeting in our living room, where eventually we would bury our noses in a laptop, crunching numbers and trying to figure out what we could cut from our already simple lifestyle. Instead we were standing inches from each other in our bedroom. In many ways, though, our hearts were miles apart at that moment. Motivated by the pressure of one more mouth to

feed and one more child to put through college someday, Brian had begun some serious number crunching. Poised next to his dresser, he stared down at a white legal pad. On it was scratched out how much we owed and to whom. The list seemed very long and the numbers very large.

Inside, I was trying not to completely freak out. I'm not of much use in high-stress situations. I actually ran around in circles once after accidentally setting something on fire in our oven. Seriously, I waved my hands in the air like a lunatic and repeated, "What are we going to do?! What are we going to do?!" while Brian calmly put out the fire with baking soda. He handles crisis moments with much more grace than I do.

While the ball of panic built up in my gut, I resisted the urge to repeat my "the oven's on fire!" theatrics. I realized I hadn't ever thought about our debt in its totality. I was merely functioning month to month, making sure the bills were paid and there were groceries in the refrigerator. Sure, I occasionally did a little "creative" financing, paying a bill just a bit late so we could make ends meet until the next pay period, but I was simply clueless as to the size of our debt.

While seeing that enormous total on Brian's legal pad was my wake-up call, he had first begun strategizing our debt-slaying journey two years prior. His moment of clarity came as we were sitting in a large-chain bookstore on a low-key date. While browsing, Brian pulled the book *The Total Money Makeover* by Dave Ramsey from a shelf and walked it back to the overstuffed chairs where we had been sitting. I can't remember what I was reading that night, though I'm sure it was—*ahem*—significant at the time.

Brian read the entire Dave Ramsey book.² He put it back on the shelf. Our date ended. As we headed back to our car, I had no idea that my husband was already considering battle plans.

He soon became an avid fan of Dave Ramsey's radio show.

Inspired by what he was learning, Brian began to cast the vision for us to pay off all of our debt. He asked me to read the book. He encouraged me to listen to podcasts. To help us dream big, he began posing questions like “What could we do with all the money we’d save if we weren’t paying so much interest each month?” He never demanded. He never dictated. He was patient and kind. He never forced me to do anything.

Brian can talk a good game. He asks questions for a living. His words and thoughts were definitely compelling. However, what spoke volumes to me was the way he began to change his own personal habits with money. Again, he did this without coercing or even convincing me to do the same. I began to sit up and take notice.

In early 2008, Brian stopped using the one major credit card we had. I tried to use it only for reimbursable work expenses. Unfortunately, I rarely made a payment from the check I was given for those expenses. Not only that, but I felt like a heel for using my credit card when my spouse had stopped using his—even though he didn’t say anything. (Keep that in mind if you are praying for new financial direction in your marriage. Change begins with you. Not your spouse or anyone else.) So in February, I used the card for the very last time.

At some point in March, we jointly made the decision to get serious about beginning what we would eventually call our “debt-slaying journey.” It appeared to be a less-than-optimal time to begin such an undertaking. Our younger daughter was due to make her appearance any day. Babies are so adorable, but they are ridiculously pricey. Medical bills, diapers, gadgets and gizmos you never knew you needed, as well as drive-through dinners on the nights you’re too exhausted to cook—the expenses are limitless and typically unexpected.

It was probably the worst time to begin paying off debt. But honestly, is there ever a good time to start? There will always be an

unexpected illness or a car that explodes, a birth, a death, a washing machine that goes bonkers. *There is no good time to begin paying off debt. There is only today.*

I am thankful our situation hadn't spiraled out of control to the point where we lost our house or our car. Looking back now, I know that both were very real possibilities. Had Brian lost his job, had illness struck our family, or had we encountered a significant repair or tragedy, we could easily have folded, broken, and shattered—financially, emotionally, and spiritually. Fortunately, our internal unease prompted some serious self-examination before we hit a crisis point.

There is no good time to begin paying off debt. There is only today.

Even so, our situation was sobering. By Brian's best estimates, it would take us fifteen years to pay off all of our debt; nine if we really hustled. He adjusted his withholdings at work, which freed up an extra \$100 per month. That meant we would no longer receive a refund, but we wouldn't have to pay anything extra at tax time either. It wasn't a whole lot compared to what we owed, but it was money we weren't using to live. On April 2, 2008, away we went, beginning by tackling our smallest debt first.³

I rarely vocalized them then, but I had multiple fears in the early days. As I stared at the columns of figures Brian had scribbled on his legal pad, a number of terrifying thoughts tumbled through my troubled soul: *How did we end up in this mess? What if we never pay all this off? What will we do if another major unexpected expense comes up? Will we ever have fun again?* (I know, the last one is a very noble fear, right?)

Then again, continuing on our current path didn't seem much better: What could happen to our family if we kept the same spending patterns, persisting in our non-plan plan?

While it might seem wishy-washy and semipathetic, before we

began the process of getting out from under debt, I had to face those fears and ask for forgiveness. I'm not talking about debt forgiveness in the financial sense, but in the emotional and spiritual sense. After pondering all the self-condemning and "what if?" questions, feelings of guilt, remorse, and insecurity gushed into my heart and brain. *How could I have been so stupid? How could I have made so many unwise choices with money? Why was I so selfish in needing one more thing?*

Don't get me wrong—remorse is a good thing. It made me uncomfortable enough to realize, *What we're doing now isn't working. Why not tackle paying off all our debt?* However, if guilt paralyzes you, it is unproductive. So at some point, I had to shake it off and rub some dirt in it (or at least that's what the coach and my dad always advised), to move on to the next step.

For me, this was a two-step process of (1) admitting to myself, *Yes, I was wrong*, and (2) realizing that we had to begin where we were right then. To get out of debt, Brian and I needed to change our behaviors that stemmed from our poor judgment, trusting God to provide avenues for us to follow to clean up our financial blunders.

Presenting the Queen of Free

As you can see, our "once upon a time" story didn't have a dramatic beginning. Brian and I didn't have a colossal fight followed by a tearful time of prayer, where we resolved to follow God's plan for our money. That's a great story, but it simply isn't ours. Instead, we began by taking small steps of obedience—changing our behaviors, seeking forgiveness, and acknowledging our overwhelming desire for hope for our financial future.

One of my first small steps included reducing our spending, especially in the area of groceries and household goods. I set out to learn how to use coupons and, *even better*, to score anything and everything I could for free.

I've always loved anything free. Who doesn't? When I was a young girl, I purchased an amazing paperback at my elementary school's book fair. To me, its pages contained the secrets of the universe. Eight-year-old Cherie squealed with glee when she learned that there were actually companies who would send you items absolutely free if you wrote a letter and included a SASE (that's "self-addressed stamped envelope" for you young whippersnappers).

The advent of the Internet brought my quest for free to a whole new level of excitement—particularly once we took on our debt. I began sharing my freebie finds with friends and family via e-mail. More and more people began requesting to be added to my already lengthy list of names. Inadvertently, I left someone out from time to time. After one too many "I wish I had known about that" messages, many punctuated with sad-faced emoticons, I decided to begin sharing my love of all things free on a personal blog.

After reading one of my tips on Facebook (if my memory serves me correctly, it was a free roast beef sandwich at Arby's), a friend told me how much he appreciated my daily tips. "You're like the Queen of Free!" he remarked. I liked it. It was a little girly but still powerful. The title stuck, and in August of 2008, I launched *Queen of Free*. In the early days, the site was completely anonymous, a place where a cartoon version of me shared one freebie a day. By the end of the year, I was offering other ideas for frugal living, as well as sharing bits and pieces of our story. Since I was now the Queen of Free, naturally Brian became the King of Free and my daughters the Princess Eldest and the Princess Youngest.⁴ And debt, our gargantuan nemesis? We started calling that the dragon. (But we'll get to that later.)

Through the world of blogging, I began to discover that my family and I were not fighting alone. The myth of isolation began to fall away when I recognized we were standing with dozens and then hundreds and then thousands of allies—women and men who wanted to wage war on debt too. Each time we paid off a debt, they cheered

great hurrahs of victory. When we stumbled and fell, they whispered, “Me, too.” I was surprised to learn that the community of co-battlers included people I actually knew but who had also been fearful of sharing their stories. Others I have yet to meet face-to-face, but my heart powerfully links to their journeys.

After my site had been up and running for a number of months, a sweet friend from the blogging community was shocked to learn I didn’t have an actual crown. She brought me a plastic tiara to a conference we were both attending, and I’ve worn it proudly many times over the past five years (even on the news once or twice). I know it seems silly, but every time I wear that crown, it gives me strength. It speaks volumes about where we have been and where we are headed. Yet I don the little plastic tiara knowing that, had God not intervened, our fairy tale would have ended as a horror story. I am confident that God placed us in a “for such a time as this”⁵ moment so we could share our experience with you.

Turning the Page to Begin a New Story

Perhaps you’re at the very beginning of your own debt-slaying journey. I know how challenging it is to admit to anyone that you have made a mess of your life. And sometimes it’s even difficult to confess to a loving Creator that you have wrecked your finances. You can’t give like you want to give because you simply are stretched too thin. You don’t have the peace that the Bible describes because you’re overwhelmed with all of the “what ifs” of life. I know. I’ve been there.

If that’s where you are today, you must say you’re sorry to whom-ever your debt has affected—God, your spouse, yourself, your parents. Then embrace their forgiveness and turn the page to begin a new story, resolving to change both your mind and your behavior when it comes to money. You will feel stronger and be better prepared to wage your battle against debt. Remember that this type of

forgiveness isn't just about apologizing and receiving grace. It's also about daily being willing to change what you do and maybe even rejecting lifelong practices and philosophies.

Once you total up how much you owe, you may be completely overwhelmed. You may even feel paralyzed when you see an exact figure on paper. That very fear begs you to quit before you begin. It yearns for you to see the number and run and hide. Odds are, even if you don't owe over \$100K like we did, you're probably not happy or even comfortable with the grand total.

When you feel as if you owe your very soul and are imprisoned by debt, you sense danger all around you. One false move and your house of cards will fall apart. One gentle breeze and the illusion you've built for yourself—*We're just like everyone else. We're doing okay. It's not that bad*—will knock you off your feet.

But remember, there is no good time to begin paying off debt. There is only today. There will always be an upcoming expense, a needed replacement, a current life struggle. If you convince yourself that there's an ideal moment waiting for you to begin your personal debt-slaying journey, you'll never pay down a dime. Instead, you will continue to be as broke as a joke. At some point, you *must* begin your own "once upon a time." If you never turn that page to begin your own adventure, you'll never find your happily ever after.



Debt-Slaying Strategies

- ✓ Set aside a half hour to sit down with your spouse (if you're married) or a trusted friend (if you're not) and discuss:
 - Your current financial strategy. Is not having a plan your plan?

SLAYING THE DEBT DRAGON

- What first step you (not your spouse) could take to begin bringing your finances under control or to improve your current practices. Make sure the change is small, gradual, concrete, and sustainable.
- ✓ Find a legal pad or blank sheet of paper. Or if you're more comfortable with technology, open a spreadsheet, budgeting software, or an app. List every debt you have. Be brave. Be bold. Don't let fear control your future.