

"Filled with courage and tenderness. I highly recommend."

—JONI EARECKSON TADA

Dave Burchett

STAY

*lessons my dogs taught me
about life, loss, and grace*





When you're in a fierce battle against breast cancer, be on the lookout for people—or pets—through whom God delivers His most heartwarming encouragement. My friend Joni Burchett was in the cancer battle for her life, but God blessed her with His warm, personal touch through the pawprints of her Labrador retriever, Hannah. But this isn't just any "dog story." This is a book filled with courage, yet tenderness; bravery, yet gentleness. I highly recommend *Stay* to anyone who is looking for a fresh and unusual touch from the Lord!

JONI EARECKSON TADA

Founder of Joni and Friends International Disability Center

Dave Burchett has written a truly wonderful book. I don't know when I've shed so many tears, laughed so much, and been moved as deeply. It's not just because I'm a lover of dogs (I am), but because this book is profound, refreshing, biblical, and true. It "smells like Jesus"! Read it and give it to everyone you know. They will rise up and call you blessed.

STEVE BROWN

Founder of Key Life Network

You can count on one opposable thumb how many books hold my interest. But Dave Burchett has written an incredible piece that describes what we've been trying to model to you all about God's grace, His astonishing love, and what life feels like when humans discover who He's remade them to be, even on their worst day. And the pages smell like a freshly cut lawn. I gotta get my master to read this!

BALI LYNCH

John Lynch's golden retriever, who loves to chew on her master's books

The Cure and On My Worst Day

Dave Burchett

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Foreword



WHEN MY FRIEND Rusty Kennedy said I had to meet Dave Burchett, his name seemed vaguely familiar. I realized the familiarity came from years of watching my beloved Texas Rangers on television. Dave's name was often mentioned with various levels of respect by the announcers in the broadcast booth. He is the behind-the-scenes director in the production truck and has been for three decades. I had heard his name countless times in that context. But that was not the reason Rusty suggested we meet.

He told me Dave had written a book about his grace epiphany and journey to freedom in Christ. I read *When Bad Christians Happen to Good People* and was blown away by Dave's honest portrayal of his struggle with performance-based faith. God used that book and others as I pieced together my own discovery of grace and identity that led to MercyMe's album *Welcome to the New*.

So I met Dave and found out he is a lover of grace and baseball and dogs. Is there a better résumé than that? I was touched, challenged, and amazed at the insights Dave has gleaned from his rescued dogs, Hannah and Maggie. I can

relate completely to his stories about loyalty, faithfulness, and grace demonstrated by his four-legged friends. We are learning similar lessons of friendship and unconditional love from our own Shetland pony-sized puppy named Lulu.

Just like me (and you), Lulu is a mess, but we love her dearly. What an example of how our heavenly Father looks at the mess we bring to Him yet still loves us with scandalous abandon because of Christ.

There is a grace revival sweeping our land. This delightful collection of lessons will show you how Jesus came to give us a new identity and a way to actually deal with sin. You will see how God can even use rescued dogs to teach a willing student that we don't need to strive to accomplish what Jesus has already done. It's an enjoyable journey of grace with Dave and his four-legged mentors. And I would be remiss if I did not let you know that Lulu gives *Stay* her highest rating of Four Paws.

Bart Millard

Introduction

The one absolutely unselfish friend that man can have in this selfish world, the one that never deserts him, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous, is his dog.

- Senator George Graham Vest, 1870



I NEVER DREAMED I would write a book about a dog. Granted, I thought my Labrador buddy, Hannah, was pretty amazing. But the idea of a book about her was not even on my radar until a devastating cancer diagnosis threatened to take her away too soon. I began to process the all-too-real possibility that my canine friend would be with us for only a few more days or, if we were fortunate, several more weeks. During those moments of sadness, I decided to journal what I was learning from this special relationship with Hannah, celebrating the memories my best dog friend helped create and the lessons she taught me.

As I prepared for the inevitable loss of Hannah, I learned an eye-opening truth: preparing for death is preparing for life. God has revealed so much to me through this unique

canine friendship. God can teach us in many ways; all He really needs is an attentive listener.

I'm reminded of a verse in the book of Job. Job, who had lost everything he held dear on earth, was being counseled by his "friends," who wondered what sin Job had committed to bring about such suffering on one individual. In frustration, Job declared that he could learn more about God and His purpose from His creation than from His people. "Just ask the animals, and they will teach you. Ask the birds of the sky, and they will tell you" (Job 12:7).

It is a sentiment I have often shared.

To be honest, I did not run to Hannah and ask her to teach me. Even I am not that weird. I had no idea how much I could learn when I opened my eyes and heart to what Hannah and her canine compadres have revealed about friendship, loyalty, trust, and grace. I began my dog "training" lessons with an unflappable four-legged instructor. When I started to "get" it, I chuckled at God's sense of humor and, simultaneously, I was touched by His amazing grace. I believe He knew from the beginning of time that I would have this special relationship with Hannah. I believe He knew that I would be fully attentive and engaged after Hannah's deadly diagnosis. God knows how tough it is to get an ADD guy's full attention, so He was not going to waste any chances.

My journey of discovery with dog friend Hannah has been a revelation. Who knew that some of my most significant spiritual growth would come thanks to a rescued puppy? I am not embarrassed to admit that I was disciplined by my dog. Author Corey Ford wryly notes that "properly trained, a man can be dog's best friend." I was blessed with an excellent trainer.

CHAPTER I

PUPPY LOVE

There is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face.

~ BEN WILLIAMS







MY WIFE, JONI, AND I are dog lovers. I grew up with a rescued mutt named Penny. She resembled some sort of mad scientist's terrier creation, and she was my best friend from elementary school until college. Here I am (pictured on the left) with Penny.

Joni loved and grew up in south Florida with a sweet Boxer named Dutchess. Joni and Dutchess made life miserable for the local duck population by chasing them every day.

Dogs have always been a part of our lives. As 2002 approached, Joni and I were at that tough crossroads for every dog owner, facing the decision about what to do when a dog is near the end of its journey. Charlie, our nearly fourteen-year-old golden retriever, was fast approaching that moment. The winter of 2001, he teetered on barely functioning hips which made walking painful.

He was a far cry from the Charlie-is-a-handful years, which is a very kind way of saying he was crazy. Charlie was the perfect blend of alpha-dog testosterone and faithful friend for a household with three rambunctious boys. He ran, chased, wrestled, swam, dived, and cuddled with our sons Matt, Scott, and Brett. Charlie was their buddy through puberty and high school frustrations, much as Penny had served that role with me.

Other than breed differences, there was one other huge difference between Penny and Charlie. Remember Marley, the yellow Lab of book and movie fame, who was described as the world's worst dog? Well, Charlie certainly had to be in the conversation at eighty pounds of hard-charging destruction.

Charlie was particularly psychotic during thunderstorms, causing hundreds of dollars of damage to our home. If a storm hit while we were away, we entered the house with fear and trembling upon returning, afraid to see what Charlie had wrought. One time he chewed off a cabinet door in order to wedge himself under the sink. While he was hidden, he chewed off the sink trap, just to keep his mind off of the booms of the raging storm.

Another memorable time, we discovered our guinea pig's cage ripped apart and its former inhabitant, Squeakers, ominously missing. We feared the worst but found no *CSI: Rodent Edition* evidence of foul play. After a few hours we heard Squeakers's terrified call from underneath a built-in cabinet. Somehow Squeakers had squeezed her brown, black, and white fur-covered frame through a narrow opening to escape thunder-crazed Charlie. No amount of coaxing or food could get that trembling critter to come out of her refuge. She was too far back to reach in and pull her out. Finally,

we hired a carpenter to saw a hole in the bottom of the cabinet so Squeakers could be saved.

Then there was the security breach incident. We were away from home when I received a surprise phone call from our security company that an alarm had been triggered. I was worried about the house but also wondered, *Is Charlie okay?* The local police showed up and reported seeing only a tail-wagging and very happy-to-see-anyone golden retriever who, upon further investigation, turned out to be the perp in the caper. In another fit of storm jitters, he had chewed through some wires.

I think you get the picture: Charlie did not handle life's storms well.

Still, in that odd paradigm that only dog people understand, we loved him dearly.

Matt and Scott were off to Baylor University at this time and youngest son, Brett, was just a couple of years away from leaving the nest. With Charlie's failing health, we wondered what our lives would look like without a dog around the house. Should we even consider the scenario of another dog? Perhaps it would be a welcome respite, not worrying about boarding a pet when we traveled or to be able to go out without concerns about what might await us when we got home.

That January, Scott called from school and got right to the point. His girlfriend (now his wife), Caroline, had "inherited" a Labrador puppy that had been passed around the dorm to several foster volunteers. The fun of having a cute puppy on campus had turned into a time-consuming reality: caring for a puppy is not far removed from caring for a baby. Knowing Charlie's condition, Scott and Caroline proposed that Joni and I take her—for a while. Scott hit the most vulnerable and by far weakest link in the family line of canine defense.

Me.

“Caroline has adopted this puppy temporarily. Her name is Hannah. We can’t watch her this weekend. Could you keep her until we can find her a home?”

Within minutes of Hannah’s arrival at our house, it was obvious that this puppy was going nowhere. She wasn’t an ordinary Lab; her coat’s color was not the usual light yellow Lab hue. She was a Fox Red Labrador, with the darker reddish tint. They are generally pricey little pups so, in retrospect, it was an added bonus to acquire her for free.

Over the next few weeks, it was clear that this puppy was something special. She had eyes that seemed to look into your soul. Her friendly expression was true to her character and she was more than happy to accommodate anyone who wanted to play at any time. Her ears were as soft as mink. Hannah was a keeper.

From the beginning, she instinctively knew that Charlie could not handle the aggressive play of a puppy. They became instant friends and Hannah was gentle with old guy Charlie in his final days.

I am a TV sports director for the Texas Rangers, which means I am on the road for about half of the baseball season from April through September. In April, I was in New York, working at Yankee Stadium, when Joni called with trembling voice to say she was taking Charlie to the vet for the last visit. He could no longer walk and refused to eat. His once unstoppable body was failing. It was time to say good-bye.

After I hung up, I saw a New York cop outside the stadium with his Labrador police dog at his side. Seeing that sweet Lab hit me hard; I was already missing my crazy friend Charlie. I approached the officer and asked him if I could pet the dog.

“He’s working,” the officer snapped at me.

“I understand, sir. I was just feeling sad. We had to say good-bye to our fourteen-year-old golden retriever today.”

The cop’s face immediately softened as he looked at me.

“Pet the dog.”

“It’s okay, officer. I understand that the dog is . . .”

“PET THE DOG.”

“Yes, sir.”

The power of this unique relationship we forge with our dogs is truly universal.

We had said good-bye to a dear friend. But God had given us a special gift named Hannah.