

Grace So Amazing

Before he met Jesus in 1989, Zachery Tims was dealing drugs in a Baltimore neighborhood. Today he's helping thousands of people turn their lives around.

Marijuana and cocaine defined his young life.

He started by selling to addicts in a high crime area. Before long he sold drugs to classmates at the Roman Catholic high school he attended, to women willing to barter their bodies for crack cocaine, and later to supervisors wanting to get high on the job. Trafficking turned him on—until, like some of his customers, he got addicted to his product.

But all that changed for Zachery Tims one early morning in March 1989.

It was close to 3 a.m., and the blackness of the night sky paled in comparison to the spiritual darkness that had blanketed Tims while he slept. Demons swarmed around him in his dream, trying to pull him into hell. It was the third straight night the hideous creatures seeking his life had invaded his sleep.

This time, Tims bolted from his bed and rushed for the door.

"I ran down the street to my co-worker's house and told him, 'I'm ready!' I didn't want to go to hell," Tims told Charisma.

At that moment, 19-year-old Tims met his Maker, praying with the man he had nicknamed "Holy Roller," pleading for Jesus to save him. He says he was instantly delivered from drugs and never craved them again. The horrible nightmares and demonic

visions also did not come back.

Today Tims is a pastor and evangelist and glad to be saved and working for Jesus. He and his wife, pastor Riva, founded New Destiny Christian Center in 1996, a flourishing congregation in Apopka, Florida, near Orlando.

It's a church where those wearing a jail-issued ankle bracelet indicating house arrest can worship alongside new converts who lift their hands in praise to God, each oblivious to the religious dos and don'ts found in other churches. It's a community resource where in February women will gather for a conference tailored to moms who raise their children alone.

Valerie Morris, who joined the church 10 months ago after moving from Spokane, Washington, says she attends the church because it emphasizes the Bible.

Morris told Charisma: "I go there because that's where I get fed. I can apply the Word to my daily living." She says she "loves" the women's ministry, called Jewels, and "absolutely will not miss a meeting."

Tims' ministry is having a positive impact on people not only in central Florida but across the U.S. and in other countries as well. This 37-year-old ex-addict, who bears a striking resemblance to actor Will Smith, travels the globe ministering with healing evangelist Benny Hinn, and millions of U.S. viewers watch the gregarious preacher on The Word Network and Trinity Broadcasting Network. Tims' new book, *It's Never Too Late* (Charisma House), chronicles his life while including a moving story of his conversion and detailing the discovery of his true identity in Christ.

Whenever he shares his testimony, Tims mentions the mercy of God that spared him not only from trafficking and addiction but also from a prison sentence of 10 to 20 years. He was charged with attempted murder in 1984 after he shot a man who had stolen drugs and money from him.

Tims, in fact, believes he himself would be either incarcerated or dead today had it not been for the persistent witness of his co-worker, Holy Roller—whose real name is Douglas ChukwuEmeka—a church deacon who faithfully shared the gospel with Tims and told him where he would go for eternity if he died without knowing Christ.

“When Doug told me about hell, I listened,” Tims says. “These demonic things would be circling around my head. A bright light would come into the room, and then Holy Roller would appear in my dream, and that’s when the demons would flee.”

He admits there were times when he had no genuine desire to get saved, but his memories of scorching summers in Baltimore, convinced him he didn’t want to spend eternity in a place where he would burn forever.

Tims now considers it his mission to bring others to Christ. No matter where he goes, he is committed to evangelizing, especially people who are battling the same demons that ensnared him as a boy.

Baltimore Bad Boy

Like most single mothers raising a child alone, Madeline Tims wanted the absolute best for her son, but she didn’t buy him pricey designer sneakers and clothes when he entered middle

school. Instead, she used her money to send him to St. Thomas Moore, a private school he had attended since kindergarten.

Though she was recently divorced and living on one income, Madeline still managed to purchase a home for the two of them to live in. But what had looked liked a nice neighborhood for raising a small family turned out to be a facade for criminal activity.

They had moved to the northeast side of Baltimore, less than half a mile from a crime-infested apartment complex. The place was a haven for drug dealers, who'd stand on street corners selling mostly crack cocaine.

But heroin was around too. Junkies would slip into nearby alleys when they'd hear someone yell: "Five-0! Five-0!"—a warning that the police were coming.

At age 12, innocent and impressionable, Tims became increasingly attracted to the dangerous lifestyle in the neighborhood.

"I didn't know they were drug dealers per se, yet by the way they dressed—Air Jordan sneakers, NBA jackets in the winter, Puff leather and lambskin coats—I knew something was going on," he says.

His father was a respected police officer in Baltimore, but Tims didn't have much of a relationship with him. Eventually, he did what millions of youth do—he got involved with the wrong crowd.

It was 1982, and Georgetown University was playing the University of Virginia in a highly publicized, televised basketball game. It was also a defining moment for Tims, then 13, who had never abused drugs.

"I was watching the game on television, and I asked one of the guys from the corner to go to the liquor store and get what we call a '40' [a 40-ounce beer]. ... When he came back, he gave me a marijuana stick and said, 'Here, enjoy the game,'" he recalls.

After that, Tims too started hanging on street corners and selling drugs.

He moved around the northeast side, trying different locations in hopes of cutting into an already saturated market. He started out by dealing marijuana, but it wasn't long before he started manufacturing and trafficking hard core drugs. Tims says it was a slow progression from selling "weed" and pills to dealing cocaine and heroin.

"We would go to one of the guys' basements, who would take the time to mix and prepare the packages. By this time I had a little team working with me. I had a little gang," he told Charisma.

One year later his influence and reputation as a dealer had spread, and Tims liked to mimic tough-guy mobster Tony Montana of the movie Scarface. He thought, as Montana had, that he was indispensable because he was a major supplier of drugs. And like Montana, Tims started to lose control as a result of his delusion.

His father could not influence him, and he rebelled against his mother's warnings. He was having sex with adult women, and his fortunes were growing from drug dealing. At age 14 he was raking in \$1,000 a week.

When a drug-dealing partner broke into his mother's house and stole his stash of money and dope, he went into a blind rage and hunted him down.

"I called him on the phone and asked him to meet me on the street. ... I came with my gun and I figured I would scare him," says Tims, describing the events that occurred. But the demons that would eventually chase him into the arms of a loving God were driving him that day to kill: "I heard in my head: 'Kill him, shoot him! Kill him, shoot him!'"

"So I whipped out the gun and fired every bullet—five or six. It was a .38 snub-nosed revolver ... stolen from a state trooper," he recalls.

His 20-year-old partner fled with a bullet in his foot, and Tims became the new drug don of Baltimore's northeast side.

Christ at the Crossroads

Even though what Tims says he wanted in life was both the safety and camaraderie of a well-knit family and love and acceptance, his choices had led him into a life of crime and violence.

He was arrested and charged with attempted murder for the shooting but was released on bail. He transferred to Lake

Clifton High School in Baltimore, where he continued his old practice of selling drugs to classmates.

Months later, Tims, then 15, was arrested again and jailed for distributing a “controlled dangerous substance.” For several months he remained in a maximum-security facility for extremely violent youth.

A local high-profile lawyer managed to get the drug and attempted murder charges reduced to a juvenile offense, and Tims was sentenced to a forestry camp in Cumberland, Maryland, near the Appalachian Mountains. It was a penthouse compared with the maximum-security prison where he could have served out his time.

The judge had called him a “menace to society,” but after earning a General Educational Diploma and serving close to 13 months at the camp, Tims was released.

His incarceration has made him more sensitive today to people in jail or prison. New Destiny offers ministry to inmates. When Tyrone Mitchells introduced himself to Pastor Tims after church one Sunday he was wearing a monitoring device on his ankle that tracked his whereabouts.

“Pastor Zach placed his hand on my shoulder, and through his tears told me he would do whatever he could to help me. The church didn’t judge me, they loved me” Mitchells says. Today, the former inmate is married and owns a cleaning business.

Had Tims had a similar Christian influence in his own life, perhaps he wouldn’t have been sucked back into his old drug habits when he was released from the juvenile camp. From age

16 to age 19, he tried to get himself together and stay off drugs, but his efforts to remain clean failed, plunging him back into his old habits.

“My father started beating me when I missed the bus for work one day. [The incident] pushed me over the edge, and that’s when I started using ... and selling again.

“I sold drugs to managers. I sold to bosses. I was the drug dealer at the [fitness club] I worked for. Managers worked for me.

“But this time ... it wasn’t just marijuana that I used. ... I began to get into harder drugs—cocaine to be more specific. ... It was a spirit ... because it was never enough,” he says.

Despite an insatiable appetite for harder drugs, Tims never put a needle in his vein, he told Charisma. “I probably had a \$100 to \$200 [a day] habit—I was addicted to snorting cocaine,” he says.

The addiction was drawing him closer to death’s door.

“What little food I ate, I could not pass. My nose would bleed repeatedly, and cartilage would come out whenever I’d blow it. My weight was down to maybe 150 pounds,” Tims says. He resorted to drinking alcohol—something he hated because his father was an alcoholic—to help him fall asleep at night.

But after ChukwuEmeka, a credit manager where Tims worked, overheard Tims using profanity while talking on the telephone at work, he became part of a divine intervention into the

young dealer's life.

"One day he asked me if I would take him home. I did and I talked to him about the rapture," says ChukwuEmeka, 52, who now pastors New Destiny Christian Church in Laveen, Arizona.

The seeds of the gospel ChukwuEmeka planted in Tims took root, made evident when Tims literally ran from the demons in his dream to ChukwuEmeka's house so he could be introduced to Jesus.

"I took him to the basement. We knelt to the floor, and he prayed to receive Christ," ChukwuEmeka says of that night.

"Not only did he get saved, but he was baptized in the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in tongues," adds ChukwuEmeka, who gets somewhat emotional when he speaks of the power of God that transformed Tims.

From Dope to Hope

After giving his life to Christ, the new convert joined New Destiny Church, formerly Living Word Church in Baltimore, under the discipleship of ChukwuEmeka. In August 1989, he enrolled in Towson State University and later graduated with a bachelor's degree in accounting.

Tims volunteered to work with the youth ministry at his church, and it was there he met a pretty Spirit-filled woman named, Riva.

"I told God that I wanted someone who had never been in the streets, never dealt with the clubs and never had sex or did drugs," Tims says. "God gave me a person the opposite of what I was, which was the stupidest thing ... since I didn't deserve it." He says he doesn't deserve to be blessed but that he has much to be grateful for.

In 1993 Tims graduated from Maranatha Bible College and eventually became chief financial officer of the church. The couple married in 1994, and in 1996 they were sent out as missionaries to Orlando, where they founded New Destiny.

Riva, 36, oversees several areas of responsibility at the church, including women's ministries, evangelistic outreach and others. She holds a bachelor's degree in hospital administration health science policy from the University of Maryland, Baltimore, that comes in handy sometimes. She knows her role is crucial.

"I'll get a call from the [church's] hospital care-team saying, 'This person needs a touch,' and I'll call or go to the hospital," she says.

The couple has four children—Zoelle, 11; Zachery III, 11; Zahria, 8; Zion, 7—and Riva says it's God who enables her to meet the demands of pastoring a large, growing church.

"It really is the grace of God. Sometimes at night I'll be thinking about a member or praying for someone, and they'll stay in my spirit until I ... reach out to them. I can't rest until I do it," she explains.

It was pastors Randy and Paula White of Church Without Walls

International in Tampa, Florida, who taught the young Zachery and Riva to focus on evangelism. They have done that and made it a goal to add the personal touch to sharing God's love, which is why every new member is given the Tims' home telephone number.

The hands-on, evangelistic approach to ministry has caused exponential growth at New Destiny.

When the couple started the ministry, they held meetings in a storefront building and had only four members. During 1999, according to Zachery, the church grew from 300 people to more than 1,000 in one week. Today it has more than 7,500 members and \$20 million in assets.

There are more than 33 ministries with programs geared toward drug addicts, men, women, youth, 20-somethings, married couples and others. Billboards throughout central Florida advertise the church and draw newcomers.

New Destiny recently opened a three-story youth facility and fitness center where tutoring, counseling programs, basketball camps, Tai Kwon Do classes and more are offered—even breakfast every day except Sunday.

The \$4 million facility was built debt free and is part of a larger plan to establish what Zachery Tims calls the City of Destiny. The project includes a 5,000-seat cathedral slated for groundbreaking in 2007, a "senior saints" home and a shopping plaza, for starters.

Elder Marguerite Esannason, director of Ministry of Helps at the church and a long-time member with her husband, Fred,

knows why the church is still changing lives today.

“We know that [people] are precious to God,” she says. “New Destiny is significant because there is much turmoil and stress—and people need Jesus.”

As Zachery Tims did.

Today his past is a testament to God’s transforming power. Nowadays when he falls asleep, he is grateful for the good night’s rest he gets. His dreams no longer are of saving himself from hell but of pointing others to heaven.

“When I was in the world, I lived for the enemy with a passion. But when God saved me and called me to the ministry, I was determined to win as many souls to Christ as possible. They need to know it’s never too late.”

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