

Conquering Storms

Deborah Young wanted time to mourn her husband's death, but the church they started together needed a pastor; and she was God's choice.

With her life crumbling beneath her feet, Deborah Young hit her knees. Desperate, the young mother of three begged God to save her marriage and her life. Deborah made a promise to God that day—that if He would just save her husband and her marriage, then she would serve Him for the rest of her life. It is a promise that—more than 20 years later—has paved the way for her life's path.

Today Deborah is the head pastor of House of Faith (), a small church in Lafayette, Louisiana, where she is doing big things to impact a community that has been completely ravaged in recent years.

Even through personal tragedies, Deborah was determined to reach out because of the promise she made long ago. It is one that would both shake and shape her life throughout the years.

A PRAYER AND A PROMISE

As a young girl, Deborah dreamed of becoming a registered nurse. But with no way to pay for nursing school, the 21-year-old was forced to walk away from her dreams and into the U.S. Army, where she began work as a medic.

Her plan, a temporary one, was to save enough money to complete nursing school. But that choice would prove to be anything but temporary when she met Paul Herbert Young Jr., a man she described as handsome and rebellious.

In the blink of an eye, it seemed, Deborah and Paul were married. And Deborah was facing the biggest spiritual battle of her life. "I had no idea that he was involved in drugs,"

she says. "I knew he consumed a great deal of alcohol, but, well, he was handsome, and I what, I can handle that."

"Well, neither one of us could handle that," she says. "And our lives just started to crumble all around us."

In the midst of the chaos, Deborah held on to a memory. "There was this military chaplain, who said 'Jesus loves you,' and I carried that with me," she says.

It was a message that sustained her in the worst of times. And it was a message that would one day save more than just her life.

The year was 1985 when Deborah cried out to God. She had given her life to the Lord that day and had one request—she asked for her husband's salvation.

God would answer Deborah's prayer more than once, beginning with a phone call. Hoping to tell Paul about what had just happened to her, Deborah called him at the same moment he was contemplating suicide. "He said, 'I was going to take that M-16 and blow my brains out,'" she recalls.

Following the near suicide attempt, Paul checked himself into rehab, where "he failed miserably," Deborah explains. When he returned home, things were worse than they had ever been.

The turning point came the day Paul, alone in the family's basement, picked up a Bible. "I heard him make a certain sound," Deborah says. "I had never heard a man cry out that way—never ever—and when he came out of the basement, he was [not] the same.

"He came to me and said, 'The Lord just called me to ministry.'" Deborah knew that her prayer had been answered again.

In 1987, the couple moved from Grand Forks, North Dakota, to Fort Worth, Texas, where they began an evangelistic ministry.

But the ministry was a strain on the marriage, and the marriage a strain on the ministry.

“It wasn’t pretty,” Deborah says of the marriage. “It was disastrous, and nothing was working in our ministry; we didn’t know what to do.”

They made plans to separate—she would stay in Texas, and he would move on. But God had other plans for the struggling couple.

“My husband was on his face before the Lord,” she says. “He ended up at my door and I didn’t want to let him in.”

But Deborah recalled the promise she made years earlier, and she was determined to serve the Lord with her whole life, even through a struggling marriage.

With a few dollars in their pockets and three small children in the back of their old car, the couple moved to Louisiana, where they opened a storefront ministry. One year later, on a small piece of land, the couple opened the doors of the House of Faith ministry. For the small household, it was more than a new ministry. It was a new beginning.

TOUCHED BY TRAGEDY

The couple faithfully built their small church that grew to about 50 people. They were determined to succeed—both in ministry and in marriage.

For the next 10 years, they couple worked together as co-pastors, building a strong marriage and a successful ministry. But in the midst of their success, Deborah’s life was shaken when her husband fell ill. She watched helplessly as his body deteriorated. One year later, still undiagnosed, he died of respiratory cancer.

Though his death shook her, Deborah describes it as “amazing.” “He got closer and closer to the Lord, and I could see him

walk towards Him," she recalls.

The night before his death, Paul had one request: He wanted to preach. Deborah recalls a quiet drive to and from their church that night. Later, she held him through the night. "We never said a word to each other; we just prayed," she says. "And the next day he was gone."

Again, Deborah recalled that promise, that prayer, that defining moment in her life. But alone and grieving, she was tired.

"I had just lost my husband, and to be completely honest with you, I didn't want to help anybody. I just wanted to be left alone," she says.

But, she says, God was calling her to lead the church. "I said 'No, Lord, I have no more room for anything else,' and He told me, 'Yes you do; you always will have more room as long as I'm there.'"

God was calling her to reach out from the church's walls and into the community. "This was a new direction that we were going in," she says. "We would not be so much inwardly focused, but outwardly focused. That is what the Lord had revealed to me."

Almost a year later, Deborah says that message was confirmed when Hurricane Katrina struck. Just two hours away from the devastation, Deborah saw a need greater than any other she had ever witnessed.

Hurricane Katrina victims began pouring into the area, and House of Faith united with other area churches to fill any and every need. Deborah remembers young mothers who would show up desperately seeking diapers, formula, anything for their crying babies.

She recalls broken families trying to pick up the broken

pieces. Some were still searching for missing family members. Just as she thought she had seen the worst of it, Hurricane Rita dealt another devastating blow to the already defeated community.

Deborah was more determined than ever to reach those in need. She even converted the church's educational building into a temporary shelter.

As the former state director for Concerned Women for America, the nation's largest public policy women's organization, Deborah was able to pull resources from across the nation. She received a flood of packages filled with formula, wipes, bottles and clothes. But her church's real work did not begin until months after the storms.

AFTER THE STORMS

"We started to learn about the brokenness and the storm before the storms. Everybody focuses on the actual storms, but there were individuals who were displaced and were lost long before the storm ever came," she said.

"The storms revealed to us in our church that there were needs that were not being met," she adds. "So we decided that, when everything was shutting down, that we would step up and we would crank it up."

In December 2005, Deborah founded Breakthrough House, a program that is currently home to 15 people, the bulk of whom were displaced by the hurricanes. She says her goal is to get hurting people back on their feet. They are required to cook their own meals, wash their own clothes and pay a small fee for room and board. "We do not force them to go to church, but what happens is that when they come fellowship with us, something starts to happen in their lives," she says.

As Deborah watched the lives of those in the Breakthrough House transform, she recalled those women—many single moms—who came knocking on her door right after the hurricanes. She

could not forget the faces of those tiny babies, cradled in the arms of their desperate mothers.

The infant mortality rate in Louisiana is the second highest in the nation. Deborah knew that those babies barely had a chance, so she founded Hannah's House, a program that provides resources for infants up to the age of 12 months.

Deborah's small church has helped change countless lives. "We are a small church, but the legacy that was left behind by my husband was a legacy of faith," she says. "Just because of your size, do not think that you cannot do great things."

She says it is not all about money, but about how close you get to those who need you the most. "Many times outreach ministry is not in your face, it's from a distance, but what we've learned is that we need to get as close as Jesus got," she says. "These people are not numbers; they are souls."

Years earlier, she recalls, she was the one crying out. Now she realizes that her pain and her triumphs, her promises and prayers were never about one woman and one man.

"[God] took a selfish woman in a horrible situation, praying a selfish prayer, and look what He did," she says. "I just thought this was about Paul and Deborah Young, but it never was about us. It was about Him all the time."

Suzy Richardson is a magazine editor and nationally published freelance writer living in Gainesville, Florida.