

Tasha Cobbs Leonard Is Still Breaking Chains for Jesus

Tasha Cobbs Leonard was born into a musical family, but she didn't sing in public until she was 15—and that only out of necessity. She was directing a community choir filled with other teenagers when the person scheduled to lead a key song couldn't make it to the concert in time.

"Everybody was looking at me like, 'Tasha, you're going to have to do this song,'" Cobbs Leonard says. "I'm thinking, I don't sing in front of people. I'm here to direct the choir." She ended up singing the solo, her eyes closed in nervousness.

"When I opened my eyes, people were in tears," she says. "They were at the altar in worship, crying out to God with hands lifted. ... Everybody was just lost in the presence of God."

Cobbs Leonard is no doubt a powerhouse vocalist, but her vocal prowess alone has not caused songs such as "Break Every Chain," "You Know My Name" and "This Is a Move" to resonate with audiences around the world and win Grammy, Dove and Stellar awards. So much more than her voice led to her being named Billboard's Top Gospel Artist of the Decade at the end of 2020.

Cobbs Leonard's acclaim comes instead because her songs carry an anointing and authority that has broken true chains in people's lives and caused them to believe the words she sings. It comes because she's a prophet and preacher as much as a singer, and regardless of the venue—Lakewood Church, Liberty University or the Essence Music Festival—she's the same Cobbs Leonard who flows in and out of all those gifts.

"I have an assurance that when I lift my voice or my instrument, that God is going to show up, or that healing is going to show up or freedom will show up, because this is the

gift God has given me,” Cobbs Leonard says. “That’s the confidence that I stand in when I’m ministering.”

Cobbs Leonard grew up in the church her parents pastored, Jesup New Life Ministries in Jesup, Georgia. Her father, the late Bishop Fritz Cobbs, cultivated the preaching and prophetic gifts he saw in her as she moved toward leading worship at the church. In 2005, while attending a ministry conference, she heard the Lord say she had four months to move to Atlanta. At the same conference, the Lord spoke to well-known gospel artist Bishop William Murphy, worship leader for the event, and told him to start a church.

Four months to the day God spoke to her, Cobbs Leonard moved to Atlanta! Upon arrival, she attended the inaugural service of the church where her cousin was leading worship. It happened to be Murphy’s brand-new Dream Center Church.

That day, in a jam-packed room, only one person joined the church, which Murphy says was “completely deflating.” But in what the two now see as a divine synchronicity, that one person was Cobbs Leonard.

Given the blessing of Cobbs Leonard’s father, Murphy became a spiritual mentor, training her in prophetic worship. She eventually became the church’s worship pastor and traveled with him in ministry.

“William Murphy gave me the grace to grow,” Cobbs Leonard says. “He would go on social media and say, ‘This is my daughter, Tasha Cobbs, and she’s a bridge to the nations.’”

But it wasn’t until she released “Break Every Chain” that she understood what those words meant. “It became real to me,” she says. “I just loved that he saw it 15 years ago, before I did.”

Murphy says he quickly realized that though Cobbs Leonard wasn’t his biological daughter, her calling connected with

his. "I knew Tasha had taken on a part of the mantle that's upon my life, and that was to be a bridge to pull different cultures and colors and denominations together," Murphy says. "That's always been a signature of my ministry, that my songs have always been cross-cultural, that you can go into any denomination and hear a William Murphy song. Well, that's been magnified times ten with Tasha Cobbs."

"For years, the church has been so fractured and so divided, and of course music is the language that creates synergy and unity," he adds. "Just name any one of her songs; those are bridges that people of charismatic backgrounds or Pentecostal backgrounds or white or Black or Latino—they all sing them. And they're all blessed by them, and it creates bridges, because now I can walk into a room and sing a William Murphy song or a Tasha Cobbs song, and everybody in the room—regardless of race, creed or color—is singing. That's what it means to be a bridge."

Breaking Chains

Although people would weep and run to the altar when Cobbs Leonard ministered, off the platform she was going through a battle. "I was dealing with depression, suffering from rejection," she says. "There would be seasons in my life where I would minister to people, kiss babies, hug people and watch people be delivered and set free, and I would go home for days and be in a dark room crying and under the covers, really warring with depression."

After she and some friends ministered at another church one night, she was making the three-hour drive back to Atlanta, listening to songs on rotation on her phone as everyone else slept. That's when "Break Every Chain" started to play. At the first three words, "There is power," tears ran down her face.

"That song spoke to me spiritually," Cobbs Leonard says. "At that moment, I felt those chains of depression and rejection

and darkness and fear and anxiety breaking off of my life. For the entire three hours, I put that song on repeat, and I allowed the Holy Spirit to minister to my heart. For probably about two weeks, it was the only thing that you would hear in my house.”

She began to minister “Break Every Chain” at her church and saw people experience God’s power to break chains in their own lives. When it was time to record her album, *Grace*, which released in 2013, she knew she had to include it.

“I knew that song ministered to me, and I knew it would bless people,” Cobbs Leonard says. She had no idea it would minister across racial and denominational lines and resonate with people around the world.

Through the years, she has received multiple testimonies about how the song changed lives. One woman wrote about her husband, who lay in the hospital, paralyzed and comatose, while she played “Break Every Chain” in his room 24/7. Cobbs Leonard says, “She said, ‘I’m writing you to let you know that my husband is completely free, completely healed, completely whole as I write this letter to you, and I just want to say thank you for your yes to God.’”

On another occasion, she was ministering before thousands of students at Liberty University’s convocation. During the service, an announcement was made: A traumatic car accident had injured three students. One of them, Ruthie Rogers, had been placed on a ventilator with bleeding on her brain, completely paralyzed on her left side. As Rogers’ mother streamed the service into her hospital room, Cobbs Leonard began ministering, “Break Every Chain.”

“We started to declare that the power that’s in the name of Jesus is breaking those chains off ... and that she’s responding to her doctors and that she will walk again,” Cobbs Leonard says.

While they were still singing, campus pastor David Nasser shared with the assembled group a text message update: "The ventilator is off. Both of her legs are now moving."

"I believe it was a modern-day miracle, which most people don't get to witness," Rogers says about what happened that day. Although she still faced a long healing process, she says, "Before convocation, a full recovery wasn't on anyone's mind."

Stories like these explain why Cobbs Leonard never gets tired of singing that song. "Each time we minister 'Break Every Chain,' God's Spirit meets us in a different way," she says. "It is absolutely always refreshing. That song, it changed my life."

As for her battle with depression, Cobbs Leonard has been candid about seeking help from a counselor as well as seeking God. "Prayer works, and we know that," she says. "But God has also given us the responsibility to do what we can do as it pertains to moving forward in our purpose. I don't think it's an either-or thing; it's both [prayer and counseling]."

Cobbs Leonard also began confessing daily, "I curse the spirit of rejection, and I receive the spirit of adoption." It's a practice she continues to this day. "Though my testimony is that I've never been back in that dark place, I've experienced it trying to come back. But I just will not allow it in my life because I know who I am."

Crossing Boundaries

As "Break Every Chain" stretched across cultures, Cobbs Leonard gained a new understanding of her purpose in ministry. "I'm always Tasha no matter where I am; you're always going to get the Pentecostal squall, the shouts," she says. "It's just who I am. ... I am always positioning myself where, no matter who you are, there's something about my ministry that you can relate to."

As a case in point, her most recent project, *Royalty Live*, was recorded at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium and has some country influences. She has recorded songs with a cross-section of artists, from gospel singer Kierra Sheard-Kelly to the country-tinged We The Kingdom. U.K. worship leader Matt Redman wrote her song, "Gracefully Broken," and Cobbs Leonard performed her chart-topping "You Know My Name" with worship leader Jimi Cravity.

But her most controversial pairing thus far was with hip-hop artist Nicki Minaj, featured on "I'm Getting Ready" from her album *Heart. Passion. Pursuit*. Many observers found it ironic that Minaj, known for her explicit lyrics, had a song at the top of the Billboard Gospel charts. But Cobbs Leonard says she doesn't regret the collaboration. She's heard from people who told her that song got their attention because of Minaj but ultimately led them back into relationship with Christ.

"It is my assignment to bring the awareness of God's presence no matter where I am," Cobbs Leonard says. "And I believe that song gave me an opportunity to reach millions of people I may have never been able to reach had it not been for the door God used through Nicki Minaj."

Cobbs Leonard acknowledges there are additional challenges that come with being a bridge connecting diverse people and cultures. "You run into racism; you run into hatred; you run into injustice," she says. "It's a very, very thin line that you have to walk, and it's not always easy."

Yet with the rise of young worship artists such as Chandler Moore, Naomi Raine and Brandon Lake, as well as Maverick City Music, which features a cross section of artists from diverse racial backgrounds and musical genres uniting in worship, she sees the walls that divide Christians breaking down even further.

"This is something we've been working toward now for a decade,

and now to watch these doors open where there's so much kingdom that's embedded in what they're doing, it makes me so proud," she says. "I know that our world has experienced a lot of friction and a lot of pain as it pertains to injustice, but I'm always looking at where Christ is and how Christ is always in the midst of it. And to watch how ministries like Maverick City are being birthed, I know that God's hand is still at work and He gets the glory out of every situation."

Obeying God

On April 11, 2020, one month after the COVID-19 pandemic put most of the country in lockdown, Cobbs Leonard and her husband, music producer Kenny Leonard, whom she married in 2017, started The Purpose Place in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Church services had been virtual thus far, but Cobbs Leonard says she's been amazed at the hunger she has seen in the congregation, even online.

"It's been so refreshing to be able to watch this community of people grow spiritually from their homes," she says. "To watch them log on with their hands lifted, prepared for worship, crying in their homes, some of them with their pajamas on—it has been such a refreshing experience for me."

Cobbs Leonard believes when churches are meeting unhindered in buildings again, the challenges the pandemic brought won't have been in vain. "I believe it was a reboot, like a revival for us to explore personal relationships with Jesus Christ again outside of having a worship leader tell you, 'Lift your hand,'" she says. "We do it on our own now. Instead of having an intercessor to tell you, 'Now is our time to pray,' we pray on our own now. We study the Word of God on our own."

In many ways, she says, the pandemic has done the church a favor. "I believe more people have now had an opportunity to see and hear the Word of God than ever would have if we had not had to leave our churches," she says.

While some worry that physical church attendance will never return to pre-COVID levels, Cobbs Leonard remains optimistic. "I do agree that the church will never be the same," she says. "I don't believe we'll ever go back to how it was, and I don't want to. I believe we're going to grow from this encounter. I know churches may be thinking people aren't coming, but I would beg to differ. I believe they're going to crowd our churches because they're going to be looking for a Savior to help them manage the trauma that they've gone through. And the church will be prepared to serve them."

In addition to her church ministry at The Purpose Place, Cobbs Leonard oversees an imprint, TeeLee Records, through her label, Motown Gospel. She plans to release music from those who are also called to impact the nations. Her first artist, Anna Golden, sang on Radio Disney as a teenager before becoming a worship leader at her church. Cobbs Leonard describes her as "relevant and necessary voice to this generation" whose "influence has already crossed barriers and built bridges culturally." Golden's single "Peace" released in April 2020, and her album *Peace Live* debuted in May 2021.

Murphy says Cobbs Leonard's influence comes as a result of her faithfulness to obey God's calling. "Everybody wants to be famous, and everybody wants to be great, but fame is the result of faithfulness," he says. "She was faithful to her dad's ministry, faithful to our ministry, and now God has given her her own ministry. People call it the secret of success, but it's really not a secret. It's a formula. You do what your Father's asked you to do."

Despite seeing God do so many incredible things through her music ministry, Cobbs Leonard says she never ceases to be amazed by God's goodness. "All my life I've been prophesied to that God is going to do something great through me," she says. "But no matter how He makes it happen, my mind is always blown by His goodness, by how amazing He is. I know that God is good. I know that He's great, and I don't discount that. But

every single time He does something, it is amazing, and it's always mind-blowing." {eoa}

Adrienne S. Gaines is a writer and editor based in Central Florida.

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