


COURAGEOUS FAITH

A LIFELONG
PURSUIT OF
FAITH OVER FEAR

A portrait of Debbye Turner Bell, a woman with short dark hair, wearing a light pink long-sleeved top. She is resting her chin on her hand and smiling slightly. The background is a light-colored brick wall.

DEBBYE TURNER BELL

Business Leader, Award-Winning Journalist,
and Miss America 1990

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**A LIFELONG
PURSUIT OF
FAITH OVER FEAR**

DEBBYE TURNER BELL



Our Daily Bread
Publishing™

Courageous Faith: A Lifelong Pursuit of Faith over Fear

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Gussie Lee Turner was a force of nature. I've never met anyone more generous, compassionate, determined, and resilient. Everything I know about God, His Word, and my place in God's Kingdom, I learned from her. Everything I know about being a woman of principle, excellence, and service, I learned from Gussie Turner. By God's grace, I am who I am because of this phenomenal woman. She was known to many as a teacher, preacher, counselor, healer, comforter, advisor, and friend. To me, she was Mommy.

Mommy, this book is for you.

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Prologue

/ don't understand, God! I don't understand! I don't understand.

In my hotel room after not winning the Miss Arkansas title for the third time, that's all I could choke out through heaving sobs while curled up on the floor in a fetal position—broken, bewildered, devastated. This was the hardest I had ever cried.

After several minutes of sobbing, I finally quieted. I had run out of tears and I was spent, like I had run an ultramarathon. I barely had the strength to breathe.

And I was a mess. Still in my competition evening gown, I no longer had the grace and splendor of a couple of hours earlier. My makeup pooled around my neck. Mascara was a distant memory. And my hair? My “do” was done.

Crying may not change things, but it can open us up to possibilities.

Lying there on the floor of my hotel room like a wrung-out sponge, I could hear my heart beating. And I heard “a voice” speak.

Debbye, I'm faithful. Now get up.

I heard those words clearly in my heart. I know, God speaking to individual people is quite controversial. But for those of us who have heard that still, small voice right as our lives changed—we know it’s real. I believe I heard my Creator that night. And those words were manna from heaven. So I picked myself up off the floor, washed my face, took a shower, put on some sweats, and went down to have dinner with my family.

Getting up is hardest when we least expect failure.

I had been so sure I was going to win this time. I had no doubt. All indications pointed to me being the next Miss Arkansas, and our state’s representative at the Miss America pageant.

My church had prayed for me. The Bible study group that my mom led in our home every Thursday night had prayed for me. And there had even been “words from the Lord” from various people:

“God said that you are going to win.”

“The Lord has given you the victory!”

And I believed them.

Besides, I was not new to this scene. I’d made it to the Miss Arkansas pageant twice before. I knew how to walk across the stage. I knew how to do my turns and poses. I played the marimba, a percussion instrument similar to the xylophone, with abandon. And I was good at the interview portion of the competition.

Plus, I’d placed second at Miss Arkansas the year before. Second place in the pageant world is known as “first runner-up.” There was a long-standing tradition at the Miss Arkansas pageant that the previous first runner-up usually returned and won the pageant the next year. That had happened something like five years in a row.

Prologue

And this year *I* was that person. *I* was the returning first runner-up, for Pete's sake! The press had predicted I would win. I was the crowd favorite.

I know to the casual observer this doesn't seem like a big deal. I mean, it was just a pageant, right? Wrong. For me, it was everything.

I had dedicated my life to pageant competitions the previous six years—a third of my young life. The potential scholarship award could pay for the veterinary education I fervently wanted. I practiced the marimba three hours a day. I read copious numbers of newspapers and news magazines so that I would be knowledgeable about current events and have opinions on social issues. I repeatedly practiced my walking and turning (a big deal in pageant land). I dieted. I exercised. I practiced my public speaking and communication skills. I believed that it was my destiny to become Miss Arkansas. For years I had spent nearly every free moment working toward that goal.

It was my dream. It was my life goal. It was my time.

The results of the competition were being announced. The emcee said, "And the third runner-up is . . ." and I prayed silently, *Lord, your will be done*.

They called someone else's name. *Whew! Thank You, Lord!* Then the emcee bellowed, "And the second runner-up is . . ." and I prayed silently again, *Lord, Your will be done*. They called someone else's name.

Finally, the emcee declared, "The first runner-up is . . ." *God, Your will be done*, I prayed as he spoke.

Even though I didn't want to be first runner-up again, I wanted what God wanted. Even if that meant the dastardly first-runner-up placement.

Finally, the emcee finished, “And the first runner-up is . . . (I’m pretty sure there was a drum roll) Debbye Turner.”

With those words, my heart broke in a way that it never had before. I couldn’t believe my ears. The crowd seemed stunned too. When my name was called, there was an audible gasp from the audience. Most people thought I would win. I had been declared the “odds-on favorite” by the local newspaper. I got huge cheers every time I stepped on the stage that night during competition.

But it wasn’t to be.

When I heard God speak to me after that Miss Arkansas pageant, I had a choice to make—one that would affect the rest of my life. It seemed a small choice at the time, but it was monumental. The course of my life hung in the balance. It came down to this: would I quit, or would I continue?

God had told me to get up. He wanted me to keep going.

Getting up after an unexpected loss is the pivotal choice each of us must make nearly every day. Quit or continue? Give up or get up? Lie on the floor of our lives or keep going?

For me, getting up off the floor of that hotel room was the start of learning how to live—not according to my definitions of success but according to God’s.

Maybe you’re on the “floor” of your life right now. I invite you into my journey of discovery of renewed passion and purpose. Let me share with you some of the life lessons that I have learned, by God’s grace.

“How did you do it?”

I heard that question countless times during my reign as Miss America. From hopeful contestants, inquisitive elementary students, sweet grandmas—even from men.

Sometimes the query was incredulous: How did *you* do it?

Everybody wanted to know how this little Black girl from Jonesboro, Arkansas, ended up winning one of the most iconic titles in the world. The Miss America pageant is a US competition, but it is esteemed around the world.

I soon realized, the question wasn't about *process* but *possibility*. People wanted to know how they, too, could achieve a seemingly impossible dream or conquer all odds and realize success, especially after a setback. They wanted to know which areas of life could trip them up and which strategies might give them the winning edge.

People *still* want to know.

This book is, in essence, my answer. In it, I unabashedly share the life principles that led to my success. I open up my life, offering glimpses into some very personal stories that I hope will help you strive for success—no matter what.

People might read some sections of this book and think it's TMI: too much information. But I believe transparency is essential for success. I also know we often fail because we think we are the only ones grappling with certain situations. While getting a long look into my life, hopefully you will discover that you are not alone.

As Miss America, I especially enjoyed speaking with young people. I could be me—just Debbye—the girl who had a dream come true. I encouraged young people to dream big, to work hard, and to never give up. I used my own journey to the Miss America crown as an example of how they could succeed against the odds.

My goal for this book is the same. I want you to dream big, work hard, never give up—and succeed. Succeed in being and doing *all* that God has for you in this life. *Nothing less!*

Many factors play a role in success. Throughout these pages I share ten. At any given time, a combination of them will help you stay on your path. But how they operate in your

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life will be very different from how they have in mine. And that's OK. My hope is that you are inspired to move from complacency to action, from fear to faith, from failure to success.

Failure

Everyone fails. The difference between you and someone else is what you do with that failure.

As you read this book, my story, the first thing I want you to realize is that I failed. Many times I didn't win. Often I fell flat on my face. Frequently I was left in a puddle of tears, just like that day when I lost the Miss Arkansas pageant *for the third time*. But out of my failure, I eventually found the power to succeed.

Perhaps you long to turn your hobby into a small business.

Perhaps your deep desire is to win at the Olympics.

Perhaps you want to become an accomplished musician.

Perhaps your goal is to be the best possible parent for your child.

Perhaps you want to turn your empty nest into a bed-and-breakfast.

Perhaps you dream, as I did, of becoming a veterinarian.

Whatever your dream is, know you will fail more times than not. Also know that failure builds the foundation for your success.

Every Olympic gymnast has fallen from the uneven bars. Many times. In fact, it's those falls that she has learned from, that have honed her routines, have trained her to perform at a level of success.

Who is depending
on you to dream
big and succeed?

How does knowing
everyone fails
provide a safety net
to pursue success?

By refocusing
from *my dream*
to *God's will*, how
might you view
failure differently?

Every musician has played a wrong note. Many wrong notes, in fact. Sometimes an entirely wrong key. But it's those mistakes that shape the musician's skill. Those wrong notes become the basis for the musician to play beautifully, almost perfectly.

Every mom has said the wrong thing to her kids at some time or other. Yet it's those very moments of failure and learning from failure that pave the way for deeper and more loving relationships.

Too often when people encounter failure, they allow themselves to be crushed by it. They let it get them down, allow it to be a negative force in their

lives. I have learned to not be afraid to fail. In fact, I have learned to expect some failures. They are the necessary building blocks of breakthrough, triumph, victory.

Looking back, it seems obvious to me now that God's hand was at work in my life, but at age sixteen I wasn't particularly concerned about my spiritual purpose and destiny. I was just interested in having some fun.

Elizabeth Howard, the choir director at my church, had always loved young people and looked for positive ways to keep us involved in the community—and out of trouble. She didn't see enough opportunities for young African American girls to develop poise, self-esteem, and confidence, so she

started her own local chapter of the national pageant organization Miss Black Teenage World, and recruited girls in our community to participate.

Dynamic and driven, Sister Liz, as she was called, also directed the pageant. It was through this opportunity that I entered the world of pageant competitions.

None of us had been to modeling school, so for several weeks leading up to the pageant, Sister Liz held workshops every Saturday to teach us how to walk on stage and present ourselves with a modicum of grace in all we did. Thanks to her efforts, the friendship and camaraderie of our group of girls transcended the competition and we became close.

Nevertheless, I still wanted to win!

Camille Williams was the brightest star on the night of the big competition and was crowned Jonesboro's Miss Black Teenage World. I placed a respectable first runner-up, technically second place. (This was the first of my long string of first-runner-up finishes.)

I came away from that experience with an important self-discovery: I enjoyed being on stage. I was not afraid of a crowd and I found it invigorating to present myself and receive the audience's acceptance and applause.

Soon after that experience, my high school counselor announced that the America's Junior Miss program was looking for participants. The program was in its prime in those days. Each year, a crop of fresh-faced, sweet-as-pie girls worked their way through the Junior Miss program to make it to the finals, which were televised nationally.

Junior Miss was a teen scholarship organization and careful not to call itself a pageant or a competition. There was no swimsuit competition. No crown. It was a scholastic achievement program designed for teens entering their senior year in high school, and focused primarily on academics, community involvement, character, and personality.

I thought it would be fun to participate, so I signed up. I happened to win the regional title of Northeast Arkansas Junior Miss, which led me to compete at the state level.

To their credit, the organizers were truly interested in developing the minds and spirits of participants. We were discouraged from thinking about winning. We were taught to concentrate on being the best we could be, finding ways to help each other, and discovering our unique identities.

It truly was the healthiest competitive environment I've ever participated in. There was no bickering among the participants. No one tried to sabotage anyone else. I didn't run into any "mind games" where participants might make seemingly benign statements or backhanded compliments designed to shake another participant's confidence.

I placed in the top eight at the Arkansas Junior Miss program but got no further. That surprised me. I really did think I was going to win. After all, why even be there if I didn't expect to win?

I expected success, but my real dream was not to win pageants.

Sure, I enjoyed the process of being in pageants. I liked the public and social world of pageants. I tried to do my best. And I wanted to win, of course. But from my perspective, it was just one more enjoyable activity. My real goal in life was becoming a veterinarian.

There was a high school pageant the next year called the Jonesboro High School Sweetheart pageant. I was elected to participate as a representative of the Future Business Leaders of America. I'm convinced, however, that it was because no one else in our group was willing to do it.

At this point, I'd had enough experience in pageants to have an idea or two about how to handle myself on stage, and so I pretended I was competing in the Miss America pageant.

I mimicked what I had seen on television, specifically how contestants spoke when they were asked questions.

While the other contestants meekly approached the microphone, whispered their names, and mumbled what they wanted to do with their lives, I bounced up to the microphone and said confidently, “Hi! My name is Debbye Turner and I represent the Future Business Leaders of America. I want to be a veterinarian when I grow up and, perhaps, I can be a part of the medical team that finds the cure for cancer!” My gusto and enthusiasm must have made a favorable impression on the judges.

Though it was by all accounts a minor competition, I had developed a new presence on stage. And I won.

In your pursuit of success, never take for granted the experience you gain from things you might not value so highly. Don’t despise small beginnings.

I didn’t realize it then, but this modest high school pageant—a small competition compared to what lay ahead—was life-shaping. In that moment I literally found my voice in speaking from a platform.

My experiences in pageant competitions at that early time in my life were not vitally important to me. They were never my ultimate goal in life. It was a life I had fallen into, a life that, as a teenage girl, was exciting and just plain fun.

What I didn’t understand yet was how these local and regional competitions would give me skills and

What are the “little things” in your life right now that are seemingly insignificant?

Are there learning experiences in them for you? Are they opportunities for developing knowledge and skills?

What might these “insignificant” experiences lead to?

abilities and confidence for what was to come. Not only what was to come in future competitions, but what was to come later in my life.

A surprising result came about from that seemingly inconsequential victory in the Jonesboro High School Sweetheart pageant.

One of the judges, Maxine Hahn, was the director for the Miss Jonesboro pageant, which was a preliminary competition in the Miss America pageant system. She was impressed with me and a few other contestants and extended a personal invitation to compete in Miss Jonesboro.

I really didn't know much about the Miss America pageant, other than what I had seen on television. Mimicking a Miss America contestant while competing in a school pageant was vastly different than believing I could actually compete in Miss America. Frankly, what I'd seen on those annual telecasts was fun to watch, but not particularly relatable to me. For the most part, there were few women of color. No one looked like me on that stage. With their megawatt smiles, big hair, and fancy evening gowns, Miss America contestants seemed like aliens from another planet. I had no reason to believe that I would fit in that culture or that being in that world was even an available option.

Maxine Hahn was persistent. She told me everything that the pageant would offer: I could develop poise and self-esteem, elegance, confidence, and goal-setting skills. That was all very nice, and I had enjoyed the pageants I had competed in, but I had no intention of becoming a professional pageant participant. I thanked her but politely declined, thinking I already had plenty on my plate.

But for some reason, this kind woman was determined to recruit me. She simply refused to take no for an answer.

And then she mentioned that the Miss America organization is one of the largest sources of scholarships for women.

I could possibly be awarded tens of thousands of dollars in scholarship money.

Well, *that* got my attention!

For most of my life I had dreamt of going to veterinary school, but I was well aware that my lower-middle-class family couldn't afford to pay for it. I would have to find ways to cover the expenses: scholarships, loans, a job, whatever means were available. Bells started ringing in my head at the thought of winning scholarship money by competing in the Miss America system. Suddenly, I realized it could be my ticket to paying for veterinary school!

Enthusiastic and excited about this new opportunity to reach my goals, I entered the Miss Jonesboro pageant for the first time at age sixteen. I grew up believing that I could ask God for the desire of my heart, so I prayed for His blessing, favor, and anointing—and that I would win!

Even at that age I had faith that with God anything was possible.

I wish I could say I sensed some higher call in that moment—that I knew God had a life-changing purpose and destiny for my participation in pageants. But I can't.

Most of us lack such insight in the pivotal moments of our lives. We like to think that God will shout from the heavens or speak through a burning bush. But God almost never tells us everything we want to know when we want to know it. He wants us to learn to respond to His voice and trust Him completely as He guides us step by step.

Who has God
put in your path
today? Who is
walking with
you on your
journey toward
achievement
and success?

God did not audibly speak to me that day and say, “Thou shalt be Miss America!” He didn’t provide automatic success.

But He did provide Maxine Hahn. I believe it was Maxine Hahn who pointed me down the path God had chosen for me.

I think sometimes the guidance God has for us comes through a person He puts in our path. Success often comes to us through others.

You may not recognize that person at the time but the key is to be open to what God is doing in your life. Be open to those He is using to guide you. This is easier said than done, of course. But prayer and faith will keep you moving in the right direction.

I entered Miss Jonesboro with great expectation.

I had been told by friends and pageant advisors not only that I had great potential and could win but also that I *would* win!

Every time I entered a pageant my family gathered for prayer. I can remember my mother praying for me—that I would do well, that God would give me favor with the judges, and that the light of Jesus would shine through me as a testimony to the other girls. I too would pray and ask God for His blessing—and *that I would win*.

In fact, I wound up in third place.

The first runner-up and the winner were older than me, and much more experienced and mature. People told me that getting second runner-up was quite an accomplishment for a sixteen-year-old, and that I just needed to wait until I was a little older and try again.

I put on a game face and made the best of the outcome, but I was disappointed. My ultimate goal of a veterinary education and winning money to pay my way was thwarted. At least for now.

I couldn't be aware of it yet as a teenager, but I was learning a few lessons. It would take a while before they sunk in, before they became painful enough for me to take notice, but they were there in that experience of losing.

The first lesson is that God doesn't always give us what we want. I thought getting involved in the Miss America program was only a means to an end—a way for me to achieve my primary goal of becoming a veterinarian.

But God had a higher purpose in mind. He had an amazing, and sometimes excruciating, journey planned for my life that would lead me to what He really wanted for me. I neither imagined the long, difficult road that was ahead, nor comprehended the far-reaching consequences of that simple decision. The girl I was then could not have envisioned everything God had planned for me.

How about you? Are you disappointed that what you've been seeking has been thwarted by failure? Have you gotten to a roadblock in your path? Has God not given you the success you asked for?

The good news is that God has a higher purpose for you and that it will be amazing. The not-so-good news is that the journey He has planned for you may very well be hard at times.

Understand that, as you discover your passions and establish your goals in life, the journey will get harder. The competition you face in any area of pursuit will become tougher.

And your failures will feel larger.

As I would soon find out.

The world of pageants can be dizzying to those outside it. In the Miss America system, numerous pageants at local and state levels are entryways to the national competition. In my late

teenage years I competed in a number of pageants at the local level with an eye on getting to the stage for Miss Arkansas, the stepping-stone to Miss America.

I tried again in the Miss Jonesboro pageant, this time placing second. Then I competed in the Miss Arkansas State University pageant, which I won.

At the age of nineteen, I was on my way to the Miss Arkansas pageant.

At the time, I still didn't have any realistic expectations for winning the title. The Miss Arkansas pageant was a highly competitive environment. Many of the contestants had been competing in pageants since their toddler years. Most former Miss Arkansas winners had competed for many years in the system before actually winning the title.

Some spent small fortunes on costumes, coaching, trainers, and designer evening gowns. At that point, my costumes were homemade or rented. We couldn't afford coaches and trainers. I was just doing the best I could with the little I had. But my competitive nature made me *want* to win—to do whatever it was going to take to be successful. At the same time, I was simply happy to be there because I had tried for so long to reach that level.

I didn't win.

Considering the stiff competition and highly experienced contestants in the Miss Arkansas pageant, I wasn't very surprised. I was simply no match for the top contenders who were older, more sophisticated, and far better dressed than me. I made the top ten, and once again was told this was good for a nineteen-year-old first-timer at the Miss Arkansas pageant, competing with women in their early twenties.

So I switched tactics.

I decided to stop competing and wait until I was a couple of years older and possessed the same maturity and experience of those other women. I didn't have any aspirations of becoming

Miss America at that point. I just wanted to be Miss Arkansas. The new Miss Arkansas would get a fur coat, a new car to drive for a year, and a generous scholarship to go toward her education.

That all sounded really good.

Two years later, at twenty-one years old, I won another local pageant and returned to the Miss Arkansas stage. This time I was serious. I was older, and more of a veteran of pageants. I knew what to expect. I had been there before, and I now was prepared. I had sought the advice of everyone I could think of.

I really wanted to win, and I was driven to put in the work I needed to.

For the talent portion, I was playing the marimba. I'd been developing my music skills for a number of years, but now I practiced three hours every day, taking private lessons to sharpen my skills. And I was a member of the percussion section of the Arkansas State University marching band.

A part of the Miss America competition is a private, job-style interview. Contestants are asked all sorts of questions, including about the world around us. I wanted to make sure that I was impeccably prepared for every possible question. To hone my interview skills, I voraciously read newspapers and news magazines and incessantly watched newscasts. I took notes on current events and social issues, then spent time thinking about my opinions and perspectives on those issues. I had a huge three-ring binder notebook in which I kept notes on current events, social issues, and my thoughts about world affairs. I asked local business professionals and my mother's friends to conduct mock interviews. They did, firing all sorts of questions at me. At the end of each, they critiqued my answers. Sometimes we even videotaped the interviews. I watched them repeatedly, trying to master my answers, posture, and facial expressions.

Next, I had to improve my onstage walk. My ballet teacher and family friend, Sylvia Richards, once told me that I walked like a goat. As harsh as that sounds, it was what I needed to hear. And work on. Again, we could not afford special trainers or coaches, so I had to teach myself. I practiced in the unfinished basement of our home, empty except for our washing machine and dryer, a few boxes, and items tucked away for storage. Propping up a full-length mirror, I walked back and forth in front of it—sometimes for hours—wearing high heels, practicing my posture and carriage. I practiced my turn, smile, and the way I tilted my head as I made the turn.

I was extremely focused and left nothing to chance. In my mind, when I arrived at the Miss Arkansas pageant, I was there to do a job. While I did want to have fun and enjoy the experience, I was not there to make friends or be elected Miss Congeniality. I had dedicated time and preparation to compete successfully in all areas of competition and I intended to do so. Making friends would be the icing on the cake.

As it turned out, I didn't get the cake or the icing.

I placed first runner-up to the new Miss Arkansas. Second place.

Devastated, I decided that it just must not be God's will for me to win Miss Arkansas and go on to the Miss America pageant, because if it was, I would have won. It was 1986 and I was in my second year of veterinary school. I decided I could continue to finance my education through guaranteed student loans like many other students. I didn't need this pageant stuff. So, I announced to everyone that I was going to quit.

My pageant life was finished!

In that moment, I made two mistakes. One was that I let failure defeat me and destroy my dream. In fact, I'd had some wins in my pageant career. But there were a lot of runners-up. And

this prize of winning Miss Arkansas had eluded me a second time. Now I was giving in to the disappointment of failure and throwing in the towel.

I told myself that the whole experience had been a positive one; after all, it had been enjoyable, I had earned a measure of success, and I had won some scholarship money along the way. Now it was time to give it all up, I told myself.

The *real* reason I was making this decision was that I was disappointed, even frustrated, with my efforts.

My second mistake was that *I* made the decision to quit. Never once had I asked God what *He* wanted me to do—I didn't consult Him about getting into pageants and I didn't consult Him about getting out of them.

Does this sound familiar? Is this true of something in your life right now? How often do we choose to do something with our own agenda and then get disappointed when God doesn't fulfill our expectations? Too often to count, based on my personal experience.

What have you chosen to do with your own agenda and then been disappointed when God didn't fulfill your expectations?

Thankfully, God doesn't let us off so easily. He doesn't let go of the dream He has for you and me.

Now finished competing, I concentrated solely on completing my education and doing other things I enjoyed.

But people came into my life to speak to me, saying things like, “Debbye, I don't believe God would have you settle for second best” and “So, Debbye, what is *God's* will in these pageants?” I hadn't really considered that before, but it didn't really matter—I had made up my mind, and that was that!

During this time, my mother was holding an intercessory prayer meeting in our home on Saturday mornings. At one

session, my mom's dear friend, Dorothy Brown, shared with me a vision she'd had: "Debbye, I saw you with a white gown on and a crown on your head and roses in your hand," she said. "I believe if you don't quit, God will elevate you to the top. You are not supposed to give up!"

That shook me. God had my attention.

I began earnestly praying about what God wanted me to do in these pageants—not just, *I'm gonna do these pageants, so bless me, Lord, and help me win!* As I sought the Lord for His will and guidance, I began to believe I shouldn't quit, because God had a purpose for my participation.

"OK, Lord," I said. "I gave it my very best the first two times at the Miss Arkansas pageant and that wasn't good enough to win. You want me to do this and so you need to show me how. You teach me how."

It was time to get back in the game.

In 1987, I entered a local pageant, Miss Red River Valley, and again placed second. Ugh. I felt I would forever be Miss First Runner-Up.

A few weeks later, I entered another local pageant, Miss Northeast Arkansas, and this time I won, which led to my competing in the Miss Arkansas pageant for the third time.

This time everyone expected me to win. I had finished first runner-up the previous year at Miss Arkansas, so I returned as the favorite and I was ready to win. I was more mature, had the pageant thing down cold, people were praying for me, *and* for the first time I had an overwhelming sense that this wasn't just my own thing, but it was what God wanted for me.

I believed, in fact, God put people around me as special provision.

When God has a plan for us, He doesn't just tell us, "Go do this the best way you know how." Instead, He provides

the way. When He has a purpose for our lives, He also makes the provision for that purpose!

My experience with selecting an evening gown is a good example.

I met a local clothing designer, Tim Cobb, who agreed to help me design just the right evening gown for the Miss Arkansas competition. This was the late 1980s and shiny, beaded evening gowns with giant shoulder pads were all the rage. Designers Bob Mackey and Stephen Yearick dominated the fashion runways. Well, I certainly couldn't afford one of their gowns; they cost thousands of dollars. They were so expensive because the fabric was hand-beaded.

I couldn't afford one, but I *really* wanted that edge.

God made a way! If I could supply the beaded fabric, Tim agreed to design and make the evening gown at a cost that was affordable for my family. So I recruited a couple of my friends and we sat in a back room of Tim's shop and painstakingly sewed the beads on the fabric by hand, one bead at a time.

There could be as many as a thousand beads in just a square foot of material. My fingers cramped. At times, my vision got blurry from focusing on the tiny beads for so long. The fabric was stretched tight on a frame, similar to the way a painter's canvas stretches over a frame. My neck and back knotted painfully from bending over the frame for hours at a time.

I sewed beads in the evenings, on weekends, and even between my college classes. It took weeks to complete the countless hours of back-breaking work. But we got it done.

And Tim made the most gorgeous beaded white gown for me to wear during the evening gown competition at the Miss Arkansas pageant.

The weeklong preliminaries went smoothly. I won my talent preliminary and even won the swimsuit preliminary competition,

which was a miracle! It was my least favorite part of competing and I did not have the rail-thin figure that was expected at the time. I am naturally curvy, even when thin. Those curves were not appreciated or celebrated. That Saturday night I was named as one of the top ten finalists. Everything went perfectly. I answered my on-stage question well, I didn't trip and fall, and there were no wardrobe malfunctions. I knew I couldn't have done any better. It was finally my time to become Miss Arkansas.

Over the previous years I had developed a little system when the runners-up and winner were announced. While I was standing on stage, right before they called out each runner-up position, I would earnestly and silently pray, *God, don't let that be me!* This year, I prayed again, but my heart was different this time.

The emcee said, "And the third runner-up is," and I prayed silently, *Lord, your will be done.* They called someone else's name and I thought *Whew! Thank You, Lord!* Then the emcee bellowed, "And the second runner-up is . . ." and I prayed silently again, *Lord, your will be done.* They called someone else's name. And finally, the emcee declared, "The first runner-up is . . ."

At this point, I had been first runner-up many, many times on the local level, and the previous year at the Miss Arkansas pageant. I really did *not* enjoy being first runner-up. I would rather be *anything* besides first runner-up. But I had reached the point that I wanted God's will more than I wanted my own. The emcee began the usual speech, "The first runner-up position is very important, because in the event that the winner cannot fulfill her duties, then the first runner-up will step forward" blah, blah, blah.

God, your will be done, I prayed with all my heart as he spoke.

Even though I didn't want to be first runner-up again, I

wanted what God wanted. “And the first runner-up is . . . Debbye Turner.”

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. I was convinced that I was going to win. Not out of the place of arrogance or overconfidence. I had worked very hard and prayed and fasted and believed God and thought I’d heard from God. So in my mind, it was established and settled. And I was there to fulfill my divine destiny.

I was mortified, disappointed, and downright heartbroken. But all eyes were on me. People were taking pictures. TV cameras were rolling. So I had to put on a brave face. I plastered on the most authentic smile I could muster. Using proper pageant etiquette and demonstrating good sportsmanship, I turned to the judges who were seated just in front of the stage to my left. I nodded my head and mouthed, “Thank you.” Someone brought me a bouquet of roses and a silver tray as tokens of my achievement. Then I was quickly escorted to the side of the stage to make way for the real star of the night, the new Miss Arkansas.

Patti Jo Thorn was the new Miss Arkansas. She was a gifted opera singer, with blonde curls, long legs, and a megawatt smile. I liked Patti Jo. I was even happy for her. But I was stunned that she was wearing “my” crown and Miss Arkansas sash. I just couldn’t figure out where it all went wrong.

After the emcees thanked the audience for coming and made a few final comments, the show was over.

And there I stood on the side of the stage, shell-shocked with a smile frozen on my face.

That was the most disappointing, devastating moment of my life. I’m here to tell you that if that’s where you are right now, if that’s the moment you’re in, then God has you exactly where He wants you.

In those moments I was confused. And honestly, I cannot say why things happen the way they happen. Why God does things a different way than we expect. We don't always know His purposes. Often we will be confused and disappointed.

I had heard God's call to get back in the game. I had seen His provision for me through people and talents and resources. I had prayed for God's will to be done. I had turned things over to Him. I'd done everything right. I'd given God the key to my success.

Very often our ultimate success comes out of failure. What you and I think of as success in the moment of this endeavor or that project or some dream might not be important in the light of our entire lives, in the full scope of what God knows is important down the road.

The key to success is in failure. Why? Because in our failure we are driven to God. And we are more open to being redirected to His plan and purpose.

My family and friends who'd come to cheer me on that night came up to the stage to congratulate me. But they looked like they were coming to view the dead. They were shocked, disappointed, and, in some cases, angry. Many hugged me and offered half-hearted congratulations.

After the pageant, I asked my family to stay down in the lobby of the hotel where I was staying, and I went up to my room. I just wanted to be alone. I barely made it inside the door before I fell to the floor heaving with sobs. Curled up in the fetal position, I cried my heart out. All my frustration and disappointment, not only from this outcome, but from so many other pageants that I'd been disappointed in, flowed out of me in a torrent of tears.

But finally I quieted enough to hear God speak to my heart, *Debbye, I'm faithful. Now get up.*

I had a choice: to believe Him—or my situation. I chose to believe God.

In that moment, I didn't know how but I knew with absolute certainty that God was going to perform His word to me. He had demonstrated His faithfulness over and over in my life, as far back as I could remember. I had watched Him provide finances as my mother struggled to raise two girls by herself. I had watched Him heal us when my mom prayed for us when we were sick. I had experienced His protection when we didn't even know we were in danger until it had already passed.

I wasn't going to give up because I had a vision of something eternal. My competing was no longer a little after-school hobby. It was no longer about the thrill and accolades of winning. It was no longer about the kick I got out of the acceptance and applause. It was, for the very first time, about what God's purpose was for my life. From that night forward my heart's prayer was, *Lord, I not only want You to be involved in every area of this pageant thing, but whatever Your purpose is in my life, that's what I want.*

With that new vision, I picked myself up off the floor, washed my face, took a shower, put on some comfortable clothes, and went down to have dinner with my family. During dinner, my family and friends made their opinions known—again. My sister and Dad thought that I should quit and move on with my life.

But they were not privy to my hotel-room encounter with God. I was changed, and there was no going back. I didn't immediately know what I was going to do, but I knew I wasn't going to give up. I left dinner determined to trust God. I earnestly started fasting and praying, not just for God's involvement, certainly not only for His blessing, but for His purpose.



To invite Debbye to speak at your next event
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complacency to action, from fear to faith, from
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—DEBBYE

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