

FREEDOM

*How I Found Freedom in the Midst of
Depression, Anxiety, and Pain*

WILL GUTIERREZ

Freedom

© 2020 by Will Gutierrez

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) ©1960, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked AMP are taken from the *Amplified Bible*, Copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Italics in Scripture quotations are the author's emphasis.

This book details the author's personal experiences with and opinions about depression. The author is not a healthcare provider. The author and publisher are providing this book and its contents on an "as is" basis and make no representations or warranties of any kind with respect to this book or its contents. The author and publisher disclaim all such representations and warranties, including for example warranties of merchantability and healthcare for a particular purpose. In addition, the author and publisher do not represent or warrant that the information accessible via this book is accurate, complete, or current.

Except as specifically stated in this book, neither the author or publisher, nor any authors, contributors, or other representatives will be liable for damages arising out of or in connection with the use of this book. This is a comprehensive limitation of liability that applies to all damages of any kind, including (without limitation) compensatory; direct, indirect or consequential damages; loss of data, income, or profit; loss of or damage to property and claims of third parties.

You understand that this book is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a licensed healthcare practitioner, such as your physician. This book provides content related to physical and/or mental health issues. As such, use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

 Created with Vellum

INTRODUCTION

Let me break the ice. I've struggled with depression, I've battled against anxiety, I've overcome the lie of suicidal thoughts, and I've been a victim to abandonment, anger, and loss. I've carried the weights of grief, disappointment, and sorrow. I've been the punching bag of sickness, poverty, and insecurity.

You probably wouldn't believe this if you met me, but with all these issues and insecurities, God thought it would be a great idea to call me to be a pastor. I'm also a husband to a beautiful woman who truly loves Jesus and a father to three handsome boys who have more energy than I can explain. According to the world, I'm not supposed to struggle with depression. People would rather have me be quiet about that battle.

I wrote this book to let you know that you are not alone in your struggle. Whatever the fight may be, God is on your side. You're not weird or unusual for the way you feel. You're not less-than for your battle. My hope is that this book will bring

encouragement to you as I open my heart and share my story. Along the way, I pray that you find freedom from many of the lies you're believing and that you can walk in the new identity that God has promised for your life.

CHAPTER 1

LIFE IS WORTH LIVING

As a pastor, I knew how to pray all the prayers. I knew how to worship God and listen to all the music. I knew how to read the Bible. I knew who to seek and who to pray to. I knew how to do all the “spiritual” things I was told to do.

But I was struggling. I was hurting. I was in pain. I was in a drought. It was a devastating and difficult time—no doubt the darkest season of my life. I had just taken a position as the senior pastor of an amazing church. But like any other change in life, there were a lot of new, difficult transitions, not only for me but also for the people of the church. There I was, in my twenties, taking on this new role, and I felt like a lot of people were against me. I felt alone, neglected, and like no one appreciated my leadership style, my youth, or the direction I wanted to take the church.

Little by little, the negativity and judgment I felt began weighing heavily on me. We had moved hours away from our families, so we had no friends and no connections. Then we

met a family who loved us well. They supported us and were there for us, and it was a godsend.

Not long afterward, their granddaughter got ill, and within weeks she couldn't walk. The doctors didn't know what to do. As the new pastor, I was believing in a miracle for her. But little did we know, she had a rare brain disease. Her life was slipping away. My faith and hope continued, but she went into a coma. A few days later, she went to be with Jesus.

I did her funeral, and for the first time in my life I questioned God. Why wasn't she healed? Feelings that maybe this was my fault crept in, and then sadness, grief, and depression came over me. Parents are not supposed to bury their children.

One night, I woke up to a piercing thought: "Kill yourself now." No matter what I tried, the thought persisted. Actually, it got worse. A flood of emotions overtook me, followed by what felt like a dense fog inside. It was the absence of peace. It was depression in its purest form. All I could envision was putting a gun to my head and ending my life.

I woke my wife, and we put on worship music and began praying. I spoke truth to myself and read God's Word, renewing my mind and taking every thought captive.

I was on an emotional roller coaster. I was literally dizzy from the movement of events playing in my head, and found myself living out and fighting what I had always spoken against. Anytime I would hear a Christian speak about depression, I would assume they weren't reading God's Word enough, praying enough, or seeking God the right way. I would wonder if something was wrong with them.

"You can't be living for Jesus and have any struggle with the Enemy." That was what I'd always been taught, and now I was up against this crazy giant of depression that was trying to destroy me. *I mean, this attack is not from God; it's from the devil*, I told myself. *Totally from the devil and of the devil!*

Am I really doing this right now? Am I okay? Am I of the devil?

Let me pause right here and say, dealing with depression does *not* mean you are of the devil. Thoughts like this may be an attack from the devil, but you are not of him. You are of and in Christ. It's just that the Enemy tries to rob us of focusing in and living out the fullness of life in Christ.

The next day, while in my car, I began feeling worse than I had during the night. It was the darkest moment of my life. My heart and head were pounding. Sweat dripped down my face. I didn't know why I was so anxious and depressed. There I was, alone and ready to end it all. Everything was fighting against me, and I was doing everything I could to cling to hope. But no Bible verse or encouragement could give me hope.

The lies came: "Will, you're a horrible father. You're a terrible husband. You're not a good enough pastor. You're not making a difference." *Why am I alive? I asked myself. Why are things happening the way they are? No one cares about me. My life doesn't matter.*

It felt like the Enemy was in the passenger seat, tempting me to drive off the cliff. He convinced me to go for it, and I gripped the wheel and drove as fast as I could. This was my breaking point—literally the moment of life or death.

Screaming, "Ahhhh, stop!" I slammed on the brakes. Tire smoke surrounded me. I was stuck in the middle of the road, and so was my life. Did I keep going or did I stop?

In that moment I thought, *Am I going to leave my wife without a husband, my kids without a father, my church without a pastor, and my friends without a friend?* I had to make a decision. I blared the car radio with worship music, and as I stepped out of the car, I prayed for God to take away everything I had been struggling with. I rebuked every lie from Satan, yelling, "Get out! Get out! Get the heck out of my car, get out of my

head!” I cried my eyes out, weeping and gasping for air. “Please, Lord,” I begged. “Help me to hear and see you through all of this.”

After reciting every Bible verse I could remember, I felt the Lord wanted me to be silent and just receive what He had for me. And in that moment I started to truly understand the value and love God has for me. And now I’m alive to tell you this story and give you hope and a reason to not give up on life. Instead, give everything to God.

Perhaps you’re like me and you’ve entertained suicidal thoughts. Or maybe it hasn’t reached that point, but you constantly struggle with worry, anxiety, negative thinking, fear, or depression. And maybe you’re like me and you’re wondering, *Is this normal? Is it okay that I think these things? Where are these thoughts coming from? Is there something wrong with me?*

I used to be ashamed when speaking about my struggle. I thought that as a leader, I needed to be strong and have it all together. But what I’ve realized is that there’s power in our testimony.

There are moments in all of our lives that build us up or break us down. This broke me. But what if every situation, negative or positive, can be turned around for good? That’s totally a God thing. He wants to turn and work all things out for the good. In situations we think nothing good can come from, God will show us the light.

I received a call from one of my close friends, Traci, who has been a huge part of my life since I was a young music artist traveling the world. The moment I pressed the green button to accept her call, I knew something was wrong. Before I could even put the phone to my ear, I heard weeping and sobbing. If death had a specific sound, that was it.

“Are you okay?” “What’s wrong?” I asked.

The crying and sobbing continued. Then trying to catch her breath, she yelled, “He’s dead!”

“Who? Traci, who is dead?”

“Jared. He killed himself.”

Our good friend who we had done close work and ministry with was gone. He was a young man who had a ministry for those struggling with depression—a young man who was a pastor just like me. He had a wife and small children, just like me. He was a bright light for everyone around him. And now just like that, boom. Gone.

In that moment, I sensed God calling me to be a voice to the voiceless. To share the hope of the gospel with those who struggle with depression. The message He wants me to proclaim is: By the power of Christ in you, you can overcome the lie. You don’t have to give into Satan’s plans. You don’t have to buy the lie that you’re not enough, the false idea that you are not loved or valuable. It’s time to declare freedom over every heart and mind.

I’ve lost too many people in my life to suicide. And my passion is to help you see the truth of who you are in Christ, see the goodness of God, and see what God is doing the midst of your struggle with depression, anxiety, doubt, confusion, worry, or pain.

In this book, we’re going to look at the lies we’ve believed about depression and then the truth that Jesus promises will set us free. We’re going to look at the promises God has for you and me in the midst of our struggle. And then we’re going to talk about how to move forward and about God’s path of healing.

Here’s what I want you to know as truth: God is for you. He’s not against you. Life is worth living. There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re enough in Christ. God is in you and He is with you—forever. Even in the midst of your worst thoughts and worst moments, God is there.

Jesus overcame the lies of Satan. He combated the devil with truth, with the Word of God. And since He lives in you, you can overcome the lies too. To God, you're worth the sacrifice of Jesus. You have more value than you know. Jesus didn't die to shame you but to save you. And so He'll never use shame or guilt to set you free. You're already as close to Jesus as you'll ever be. This isn't a book about you striving to get more of His presence, love, or acceptance.

Since God has qualified you forever, no struggle can disqualify you from God using you. God isn't mad at you. He's crazy in love with you. Your greatest days are ahead because God is never late. His timing is perfect, and since you're in Him, He's got you! God will never quit on you or give up on you. Even if you have absolutely no faith, God remains faithful to you (see 2 Timothy 2:13).

God's grace has you. There's nothing you can do to remove yourself from His presence or His grace. There's nothing you can do or think or feel that will cause Him to love you less. God's love and care for you is based on what Christ has done for you, not what you do or don't do.

God is working everything that has ever happened to you for your good. That's why I believe your greatest days are ahead of you. Your life matters. Your story matters. And I know that God wants to do immeasurably more than we can ever ask or imagine (see Ephesians 3:20)!