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Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire

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PART 1



Waking Up to a Powerful Promise

ONE



The Amateurs

I WAS STRUGGLING TOWARD the climax of my none-too-polished sermon that Sunday night back in 1972 when disaster struck. It was both pathetic and laughable all at once.

The Brooklyn Tabernacle—this woeful church that my father-in-law had coaxed me into pastoring—consisted of a shabby two-story building in the middle of a downtown block on Atlantic Avenue. The sanctuary could hold fewer than two hundred people—not that we required anywhere near that much capacity. The ceiling was low, the walls needed paint, the windows were dingy, and the bare wood floor hadn't been sealed in years. But there was no money for such improvements, let alone a luxury such as air-conditioning.

Carol, my faithful wife, was doing her best at the organ to create a worshipful atmosphere as I moved into my invitation, calling the fifteen or so people before me to maybe, just possibly, respond to the point of my message. Someone shifted on a pew to my left, probably not out of conviction as much as weariness, wondering when this young preacher would finally let everybody go home.

C-r-r-a-a-ck!

The pew split and collapsed, dumping five people onto the floor. Gasps and a few groans filled the air. My infant daughter probably thought it was the most exciting moment of her church life so far. I stopped preaching to give the

people time to pick themselves up off the floor and replace their lost dignity. All I could think to do was to nervously suggest that they move to another pew that seemed more stable as I tried to finish the meeting.

In fact, this kind of mishap perfectly portrayed my early days in ministry. I didn't know what I was doing. I had not attended Bible college or seminary. I had grown up in Brooklyn in a Ukrainian-Polish family, going to church on Sundays with my parents but never dreaming of becoming a minister.

Basketball was my love, all through high school and then at the U.S. Naval Academy, where I broke the plebe scoring record my first year. Late that year I hurt my back and had to resign from the navy. I resumed college on a full athletic scholarship at the University of Rhode Island, where I was a starter on the basketball team for three years. In my senior year I was captain of the team; we won the Yankee Conference championship and played in the NCAA tournament.

My major was sociology. By then I had begun dating Carol Hutchins, daughter of the man who was my pastor back in junior high and high school. Carol was a gifted organist and pianist even though she had never been formally trained to read or write music. We were married in January 1969 and settled down in a Brooklyn apartment, both getting jobs in the hectic business world of Manhattan. Like many newlyweds, we didn't have a lot of long-term goals; we were just paying bills and enjoying the weekends.

However, Carol's father, the Reverend Clair Hutchins, had been giving me books that piqued my desire for spiritual things. He was more than a local pastor; he made frequent trips overseas to preach evangelistic crusades and teach other pastors. In the States he was the unofficial overseer of a few small, independent churches. By early 1971 he was seriously suggesting that perhaps God wanted us in full-time Christian service.

“There’s a church in Newark that needs a pastor,” he commented one day. “They’re precious people. Why don’t you think about quitting your job and stepping out in faith to see what God will do?”

“I’m not qualified,” I protested. “Me, a minister? I have no idea how to be a pastor.”

He said, “When God calls someone, that’s all that really matters. Don’t let yourself be afraid.”

And before I knew it, there I was, in my late twenties, trying to lead a tiny, all-black church in one of the most difficult mission fields in urban America. Weekdays found me spending hours in the systematic study of God’s Word while on Sundays I was “learning” how to convey that Word to people. Carol’s musical ability made up for some of my mistakes, and the people were kind enough to pay us a modest salary.

My parents gave us a down payment for a home, and we moved to New Jersey. Somehow we made it through that first year.

DOUBLE DUTY

THEN ONE DAY my father-in-law called from Florida, where he lived, and asked a favor. Would I please go preach four Sunday nights over at the multiracial Brooklyn Tabernacle, another church he supervised? Things had hit an all-time low there, he said. I agreed, little suspecting that this step would forever change my life.

The minute I walked in, I could sense that this church had big problems. The young pastor was discouraged. The meeting began on a hesitant note with just a handful of people. Several more walked in late. The worship style bordered on chaotic; there was little sense of direction. The pastor noticed that a certain man was present—an occasional visitor to the

church who sang and accompanied himself on the guitar—and asked him on the spot to come up and render a solo. The man sort of smiled and said no.

“Really, I’m serious,” the pastor pleaded. “We’d love to have you sing for us.” The man kept resisting. It was terribly awkward. Finally the pastor gave up and continued with congregational singing.

I also remember a woman in the small audience who took it upon herself to lead out with a praise chorus now and then, jumping into the middle of whatever the pastor was trying to lead.

It was certainly odd, but it wasn’t my problem. After all, I was just there to help out temporarily. (The thought that I, at that stage of my development as a minister, could help anyone showed how desperate things had become.)

I preached, and then drove home.

After the second week’s service, the pastor stunned me by saying, “I’ve decided to resign from this church and move out of state. Would you please notify your father-in-law?”

I nodded and said little. When I called that week with the news, the question quickly arose as to whether the church should even stay open.

Some years earlier, my mother-in-law had met with other women who were interceding for God to establish a congregation in downtown Brooklyn that would touch people for his glory. That was how this church had actually started—but now all seemed hopeless.

As we discussed what to do, I mentioned something that the pastor had told me. He was sure one of the ushers was helping himself to the offering plate, because the cash never quite seemed to match the amounts written on people’s tithing envelopes. No wonder the church’s checking account held less than ten dollars.

My father-in-law wasn't ready to give up. "I don't know—I'm not sure God is finished with that place quite yet," he said. "It's a needy part of the city. Let's not throw in the towel too quickly."

"Well, Clair, what are you going to do when the other pastor leaves?" asked his wife, who was listening on their other phone. "I mean, in two weeks . . ."

His voice suddenly brightened. "Jim, how about if you pastor both churches for the time being? Just give it a chance and see if it might turn around?" He wasn't kidding; he really meant it.

I didn't know what to say. One thing I was sure of: I didn't have any magic cure-all for what ailed the Brooklyn Tabernacle. Still, my father-in-law's concern was genuine, so I went along with the plan.

Now, instead of being an amateur in one congregation, I could double my pleasure. For the next year, this was my Sunday schedule:

9:00 a.m. Leave home in New Jersey and drive alone to Brooklyn.

10:00 a.m. Conduct the morning service by myself.

11:30 a.m. Race back across Manhattan and through the Holland Tunnel to the Newark church, where Carol and the others would have already begun the noon service. Preach the sermon.

Late afternoon: Take Carol and the baby to McDonald's, then head back to Brooklyn for the evening service there.

Late evening: Drive back home to New Jersey, exhausted and usually discouraged.

Vagrants would wander in occasionally during the meetings in Brooklyn. The attendance dropped to fewer than

twenty people because a number of folks quickly decided I was “too regimented” and elected to go elsewhere.

Sunday mornings without Carol were especially difficult. The pianist had mastered only one chorus, “Oh, How I Love Jesus.” We sang it every week, sometimes more than once. All other selections led to stumbling and discords. This did not exactly seem like a church on the move.

I shall never forget that first Sunday morning offering: \$85. The church’s monthly mortgage payment was \$232, not to mention the utility bills or having anything left over for a pastoral salary.

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I shall never forget that first Sunday morning offering: \$85. ♻️

When the first mortgage payment rolled around at the end of the month, the checking account showed something like \$160 in hand. We were going to default right off the bat. How soon would it take to lose the building and be tossed out into the street? That Monday, my day off, I remember praying, “Lord, you have to help me. I don’t know much—but I *do* know that we have to pay this mortgage.”

I went to the church on Tuesday. *Well, maybe someone will send some money out of the blue*, I told myself, *like what happened so often with George Mueller and his orphanage back in England—he just prayed, and a letter or a visitor would arrive to meet his need.*

The mail came that day—and there was nothing but bills and fliers.

Now I was trapped. I went upstairs, sat at my little desk, put my head down, and began to cry. “God,” I sobbed, “what can I do? We can’t even pay the mortgage.” That night was the midweek service, and I knew there wouldn’t be more than

three or four people attending. The offering would probably be less than ten dollars. How was I going to get through this?

I called out to the Lord for a full hour or so. Eventually, I dried my tears—and a new thought came. *Wait a minute! Besides the mail slot in the front door, the church also has a post office box. I'll go across the street and see what's there. Surely God will answer my prayer!*

With renewed confidence I walked across the street, crossed the post office lobby, and twirled the knob on the little box. I peered inside . . .

Nothing.

As I stepped back into the sunshine, trucks roared down Atlantic Avenue. If one had flattened me just then, I wouldn't have felt any lower. Was God abandoning us? Was I doing something that displeased him? I trudged wearily back across the street to the little building.

As I unlocked the door, I was met with another surprise. There on the foyer floor was something that hadn't been there just three minutes earlier: a simple white envelope. No address, no stamp—nothing. Just a white envelope.

With trembling hands I opened it to find . . . *two \$50 bills.*

I began shouting all by myself in the empty church. “God, you came through! You came through!” We had \$160 in the bank, and with this \$100 we could make the mortgage payment. My soul let out a deep “Hallelujah!” What a lesson for a disheartened young pastor!

To this day I don't know where that money came from. I only know it was a sign to me that God was near—and faithful.

BREAKDOWN

THE HECTIC SCHEDULE, of course, was wearing us out, and Carol and I soon realized we should cast our lot with one

church or the other. Oddly enough, we began to feel drawn to Brooklyn, even though our only salary came from the Newark church. Remarkably, God put it into both our hearts to commit ourselves, for better or worse, to the fledgling Brooklyn Tabernacle. We somehow knew that was where we belonged.

Both of us quickly took second jobs—she in a school cafeteria, I as a junior high basketball coach. We had no health insurance. Somehow we put food on the table and bought gas for the car, but that was about it.

I didn't know whether this was a normal experience in the ministry or not; I had no preconceived ideas from Bible college or seminary by which to judge, because I hadn't been there. We were just blundering along all by ourselves. Even Carol's father didn't offer a lot of advice or perspective; I guess he thought I would learn more in the school of hard knocks. He often told me, "Jim, you're just going to have to find your own way, under God, of ministering to people."

On one of those Sunday nights early on, I was so depressed by what I saw—and even more by what I felt in my spirit—that I literally could not preach. Five minutes into my sermon, I began choking on the words. Tears filled my eyes. Gloom engulfed me. All I could say to the people was "I'm sorry . . . I . . . I can't preach in this atmosphere. . . . Something is terribly wrong. . . . I don't know what to say—I can't go on. . . . Carol, would you play something on the piano, and would the rest of you come to this altar? If we don't see God help us, I don't know. . . ." With that, I just quit. It was embarrassing, but I couldn't do anything else.

The people did as I asked. I leaned into the pulpit, my face planted in my hands, and sobbed. Things were quiet at first, but soon the Spirit of God came down upon us. People began to call upon the Lord, their words motivated by a stirring within. "God, help us," we prayed. Carol played the old

hymn “I Need Thee, Oh, I Need Thee,” and we sang along. A tide of intercession arose.

Suddenly a young usher came running down the center aisle and threw himself on the altar. He began to cry as he prayed.

When I placed my hand on his shoulder, he looked up, the tears streaming down his face as he said, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I won’t do it again! Please forgive me.” Instantly I realized that he was apologizing for taking money from the offering plate. I stood speechless for a moment, bewildered by his unexpected confession.

It was our first spiritual breakthrough. I had not had to play detective, confront the culprit with his misdeed, or pressure him to confess. Here in a single night, during a season of prayer, Problem Number One (out of seemingly thousands) was solved.

That evening, when I was at my lowest, confounded by obstacles, bewildered by the darkness that surrounded us, unable even to continue preaching, I discovered an astonishing truth: God is attracted to weakness. He can’t resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him. Our weakness, in fact, makes room for his power.

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In a parallel vein, people are not put off by honesty, either. I didn’t have to keep up a ministerial front. I could just preach God’s Word as best I knew and then call the congregation to prayer and worship. The Lord would take over from there.

How I treasure those early humblings. Those experiences showed me that I didn't need to play the preacher. Jesus called fishermen, not graduates of rabbinical schools. The main requirement was to be natural and sincere. His disciples had to depend totally upon the Lord and his power. In the same way, I had to stop trying to act ministerial—whatever that was. God could only use Jim Cymbala the way he is. What a breakthrough that was for me as I learned to trust in God to use my natural personality. God has always despised sham and pretense, especially in the pulpit. The minute I started trying to effect a posture or pose, God's Spirit would be grieved.

What I could do, however, was to get even more serious about studying. I began building a biblical library and giving many hours during the week to digging into God's Word. But another John Wesley or G. Campbell Morgan I would never be—that was obvious. I had to find my own style and stay open and dependent on God.

ON THE RAGGED EDGE

EVERY WEEK SEEMED TO carry with it a new challenge. The burner went out on the heating system and would cost \$500 to repair. Unfortunately, my impassioned efforts as a fundraiser mustered only \$150 in pledges from the people. I thought more than ever about quitting. *I'm not cut out for this*, I told myself. *I don't have that ministerial flair. I don't have a pastoral voice. I'm not an orator. I look too young. I'm so tired. . . .*

Neither Carol nor I knew where to turn for support. My parents lived in another part of Brooklyn, but my father was battling alcoholism at that point, and my mother was consumed with the struggle. So we couldn't rely much on her for encouragement.

The mother of one of Carol's friends heard what we were doing and dropped by one Sunday. She didn't say it, but you could tell what she was thinking: *What's a nice young couple like you doing down here?* It didn't take long to discover that most middle-class white Christians in other parts of the city did not find our location or congregation very attractive.

Some of the members we inherited were so out of step with the flavor of the church, so set on their own agenda, that I actually began to pray they would leave. One man informed me that he, too, was ordained and should be allowed to preach on Sunday nights. What I observed in his spiritual life, however, indicated just the opposite.

Confrontation came hard because we could ill afford to lose people. But if these members were to stay, the result would be ongoing discord—and I knew the Lord would never bless that kind of a mess with the spiritual power we so desperately needed. One by one, these people made their exit. On a couple of occasions I even had to help answer my own prayers by suggesting that members consider another church. I was learning that in pastoral work, as in basketball, sometimes you have to confront.

In time, despite these defections, the congregation was no longer twenty; it grew to forty or forty-five. The finances remained touch-and-go. Friends sometimes left bags of groceries on our doorstep, for which we were grateful. My first year in Brooklyn we received a total of \$3,800 in salary. (The national average income for a household our size was \$14,000!) The second year we climbed all the way to \$5,200.

On more than one wintry Saturday night, I would think about the fact that attendance the next morning would probably be low because of the snow—most of our people couldn't afford cars. This would mean an even smaller offering. At

such times I wondered how I could possibly face another Sunday. I even hoped that by some miracle the sun wouldn't come up the next morning.

Carol started a little choir with a grand total of nine voices. But problems soon arose there, too. No sooner did the choir begin to sing in the meetings than one of the girls in it got pregnant out of wedlock. In a small congregation everyone notices everything; everyone *talks about* everything.

After we had some Sunday night times of prayer around the altar, when people got into the habit of calling on the Lord, our attendance grew to fifty or sixty. But I knew God wanted to do much more . . . and he would, if we provided good soil in which he could work. I was tired of the escapist mentality I had witnessed since childhood—always glorifying what God did way back in some revival, or else passionately predicting “the coming great move of God” just ahead. The truth is, I knew there were countless churches across the city and the nation that had not baptized a hundred truly converted sinners in a year, and most not in several years. Any growth came simply through transfers from one church to another. New York City was a hard mission field, but transfer growth was not what God had in mind for us.

What we needed instead was a fresh wind and fresh fire. We needed the Holy Spirit to transform the desperate lives of people all around us. Alcohol and heroin dominated the neighborhood; LSD was also a problem, and cocaine was starting its wicked rise. Prostitutes were working a couple of street corners within three blocks of the church. Urban decay had clearly set in. Anybody who could make any money was trying to get *away* from our area.

I despaired at the thought that my life might slip by without seeing God show himself mightily on our behalf. Carol and I didn't want merely to mark time. I longed and

cried out for God to change everything—me, the church, our passion for people, our praying.

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One day I told the Lord that I would rather die than merely tread water throughout my career in the ministry . . . always preaching about the power of the Word and the Spirit, but never seeing it. I abhorred the thought of just having more church services. I hungered for God to break through in our lives and ministry.

THE PROMISE

ABOUT THAT TIME, I came down with a cough that would not go away. I hacked and hacked for six weeks, to the point that Carol could hardly get any sleep at night. I was spitting up phlegm every day.

My in-laws became so concerned that they paid my airfare to come down to their home near St. Petersburg, Florida, and get some rest in the warm sunshine. Gratefully, I headed their way. The only bad part was leaving Carol and two-year-old Chrissy behind.

One day I went out on a party fishing boat with twenty or thirty tourists. The sky was an azure blue, and the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico lapped soothingly against the sandy shore. Seagulls swooped and squawked overhead. The sun felt good for my congested lungs.

As we launched out toward deep water, the others laughed and talked about the fish they hoped to catch that

afternoon. I held a pole in my hands, too . . . but my mind wasn't on fishing. I moved down toward the end of the boat, away from the crowd, and stared at the far horizon.

I began mulling over the many ideas and strategies I had heard or read on church growth. One Christian leader had told me, "Forget about the institutional church *building*; home meetings are where it's at these days. You might as well sell your building; God is doing a new thing."

A once-large and historic Baptist church a few blocks away had invested heavily in a fleet of buses, trying to bring in large numbers of children. The only results were high insurance rates, chronic vandalism, and an unchanged church.

I had attended larger churches that seemed to center on bringing in popular speakers and singers, whoever was hot at the moment. This helped market the church . . . at least to other Christians. As one pastor told me with a smile, "I don't 'steal sheep' from other churches, but I do like to leave my gate wide open."

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**The embarrassing truth is that sometimes
 even *I* didn't want to show up for a
 service—that's how bad it was.** ❧

Whether that was a valid approach or not, it took money, so forget it—nobody would come to downtown Brooklyn for the little honorarium we could afford. Moreover, Carol and I had frankly admitted to each other that unless God broke through, the Brooklyn Tabernacle was doomed. We couldn't finesse it along. We couldn't organize and market and program our way out. The embarrassing truth was that sometimes even *I* didn't want to show up for a service—that's how bad it was.

We *had* to have a visitation of the Holy Spirit, or bust.

“Lord, I have no idea how to be a successful pastor,” I prayed softly out there on the water. “I haven’t been trained. All I know is that Carol and I are working in the middle of New York City, with people dying on every side, overdosing from heroin, consumed by materialism, and all the rest. If the gospel is so powerful . . .”

I couldn’t finish the sentence. Tears choked me. Fortunately, the others on the boat were too far away to notice as they studied their lines in the blue-green water.

Then quietly but forcefully, in words heard not with my ear but deep within my spirit, I sensed God speaking:

If you and your wife will lead my people to pray and call upon my name, you will never lack for something fresh to preach. I will supply all the money that’s needed, both for the church and for your family, and you will never have a building large enough to contain the crowds I will send in response.

I was overwhelmed. My tears intensified. I looked up at the other passengers, still occupied with their fishing. Nobody glanced in my direction.

I knew I had heard from God, even though I had not experienced some strange vision, nothing sensational or peculiar. God was simply focusing on the only answer to our situation—or anybody else’s, for that matter. His word to me was grounded in countless promises repeated in the Scriptures; it was the very thing that had produced every revival of the Holy Spirit throughout history. It was the truth that had made Charles G. Finney, Dwight L. Moody, A. B. Simpson, and other men and women mightily used of God. It was what I already knew, but God was now drawing me out, pulling me toward an actual experience of himself and his power. He was telling me that my hunger for him and his transforming

power would be satisfied as I led my tiny congregation to call out to him in prayer.

As the boat docked later that afternoon, I felt wonderfully calm. A few days later I flew back to New York, still the same young pastor I had always been. But all the modern trends and new ideas about church growth were now irrelevant. God had promised to provide, to respond to our cries for divine help. We were not alone, attempting the impossible in a heartless world. God was present, and he would act on our behalf.

A holy excitement came over me. I actually looked forward to the next Sunday morning on Atlantic Avenue.