

CHAPTER 1

AN UNFORGETTABLE EVENING

*God will ignite His people with an intense, burning
passion like we have never known before.*

It was the fourth and final in a series of meetings at Covenant Love Family Church, Fayetteville, North Carolina. It was not my first time with them, for I had ministered at this church several times before. The meetings always bore wonderful fruit because of their genuine hunger and love for God.

It was late, long past the time a regular service would have let out. Yet I was hesitant to close; I was in the midst of a struggle. The message had come forth clear and concise, and the people had responded enthusiastically. But I felt a sense of incompleteness. I was usually able to close a series of services with a sense of fulfillment, especially with such a receptive church. That night it was different.

Adding to this struggle, I kept hearing the words the Holy Spirit whispered in my heart while I was flying to Fayetteville: “These meetings will be the most powerful you have experienced at this church.”

I had been to this church seven or eight times over the years, and I wouldn’t hesitate to include it on my list of the most life-changing meetings. I remember thinking on the plane: *That’s saying a lot.*

As I stood on the platform, I was bewildered. The meetings were not the most powerful. It was hard for me not to compare them to the significant acts and testimonies in previous services. I wrestled with the temptation of complaining within, yet I knew I had to stay focused on the service before me. I desperately needed to hear from God.

It seemed the presence of God was hovering over the people. It was almost as if He wanted to fall on the congregation in a strong and powerful way, yet was somehow restrained. There were isolated pockets of people weeping here and there, but I knew God wanted much more. Although I had sensed a similar atmosphere on previous nights, I was certain that on the last night the Lord would honor us with His refreshing presence, just as He had in the past. There was not to be another service. “Why is He not touching these people when I perceive He desires to?” I kept asking myself.

REVELATION THAT GAVE DIRECTION

Then I heard the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit speak to me. He showed me that something was hindering the churches of this city, just as there was a hindrance in the service. It kept the churches from growing beyond a certain point. Once they achieved it, they either split or became religious and ineffective.

No sooner had I shared this with the congregation than the pastor jumped up and confirmed it. He had done present and historical studies on the city and affirmed this was statistically correct. While he was speaking I again heard the voice of the Holy Spirit. He explained how this hindrance could be broken.

When the pastor was finished speaking, he handed the microphone back to me. I said, “Folks, God has shown me that a forty-day fast will break this hindrance.”

I could almost hear the thoughts of the people, *Go forty days without food!*

I continued, “It is not necessarily a food fast, and most likely it is not a total refraining from food. It is a fast of what keeps you from seeking the Lord. It may be television, videos, computer games, newspapers, excessive shopping and phone conversations, and so forth.”

This is a true fast. Too often we go on hunger strikes to hear from God, yet continue our busy, distracted lives. That is not a fast; therefore, we get very little benefit. A true fast occurs when we abstain for the purpose of seeking God in a more focused manner.

The children of Israel would abstain from food and question the Lord: “Why aren’t You impressed?” or “Why don’t You even notice our efforts?”

God answered them through the prophet Isaiah, “I will tell you why! It’s because you are living for yourselves even while you are fasting . . . This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me” (Isa. 58:3–4 NLT).

I returned the microphone to the pastor, and he immediately committed himself to the fast and pleaded with the entire congregation to do the same. They set their hearts as one to seek God.

The next day I realized the Sunday forty days later was open in my schedule. I shared this with the pastor, and he responded, “I would love for you to be here.”

Over the following weeks we kept in touch. Already exciting testimonies were coming from the families who were fasting. Students, who previously struggled in school, were seeing their C’s and D’s rise to A’s and B’s. There were reports of increased obedience and respect in children and teenagers. Worldly things and pursuits seemed to be losing their hold and attraction. Wives excitedly shared how their husbands were like different men. Fathers were leading Bible studies and praying with their families. Relationships were healed while still others were experiencing physical healing. Homes were turning around as people drew near to God.

I also learned from the pastor how their services were increasingly more powerful with several new people coming into the kingdom of

God. Virtually all areas were being affected as a result of this church's obedience to heed the word of the Lord.

A DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET

Six Sundays later, November 3, 1996, I returned to the church to minister. It would be a day I'd never forget. Even as I entered the sanctuary for the morning service, I noticed the air was thick with expectancy. The message I gave from the Word of God was met with absorbent hearts and souls.

At the conclusion of the service the pastor exhorted the congregation to arrive early that evening to prepare their hearts in prayer. He also instructed the parents that children's church would be included in the main service that evening; he wanted all age-groups together for that service with the exception of those ages six and under. I had never known him to do that before. He admonished the parents, "If you or your children miss this service, you will regret it the rest of your life." His comment surprised and almost concerned me, but I elected not to say anything, and I'm glad I didn't.

That night the auditorium was packed with nearly 1,300 people. I taught on the fear of the Lord, with the message concluding at approximately 9:00 P.M. The teaching was so intense, you could have heard a pin drop in the auditorium anytime I paused, even with all the young children in attendance.

At the conclusion of the message, the worship leader and I led the congregation in a couple of worship songs. I then heard the Spirit of God whisper, "I want to minister to the people. Please allow Me to."

I realized that even though we were singing songs of worship, it was not the direction He desired. I alerted the people, "The Lord just spoke to my heart. He wants to minister to us, so let's be still and focus on Him."

For the next ten minutes or so, you could hear various people crying quietly in the presence of the Lord. From all appearances it seemed the same as the services six weeks earlier, yet I knew something was different and about to happen.

About 9:15 the quiet atmosphere suddenly changed. From the back of the building I could hear high-pitched cries. It was easy to identify them as the voices of the youngsters. Approximately 150 children who were ages seven through twelve were sitting with their teachers in the back right-hand side of the auditorium. I knew God was touching them. I invited them forward by saying, “The children, God is touching the children. I want all the children that God is touching to come down to the front of the platform.”

I will never forget what I saw. Some of you may think what I share is a bit extreme, and if I had not seen it, along with 1,200 other witnesses in attendance, I might agree. Frankly I will not be able to do it justice when I describe the magnitude of what God did that night, but I will make an attempt. I want to point out that it is a fairly conservative church. Most of the members are from denominational backgrounds that are not demonstrative, or they have not grown up in church at all and have been saved in this church. The pastor is a very good teacher and not given to extremism, sensationalism, or hype.

I observed children, mostly ages seven through nine years, coming down the aisle toward me, weeping uncontrollably. Many covered their faces with their hands. Others struggled to walk straight. Upon reaching the platform area, some fell to their knees because they lacked the strength to stand, but most collapsed as if their knees completely gave way. They fell all over, some on top of one another. The teary-eyed ushers helped them. Within moments, I watched as nearly one hundred small children wept and cried, while most shook profusely. They were engulfed in the manifested presence of the Lord.

This did not go on for two or three minutes; it lasted more than an hour! You would think hearing so many children weep and wail for such a long period of time would possibly be irritating, but it was

glorious. Most of the adults' eyes were filled with tears as they watched what God was doing in the children. Yet at the same time they themselves were being strongly touched by the powerful presence of God. It was as if one wave of God's presence would come in only to be followed by another one more powerful. When it seemed that the children couldn't cry, scream, or shake any longer, another wave of God's presence would come and raise the intensity to another level. At times I could only drop my head on the podium because of the heaviness of God's presence.

I watched one young girl, no more than seven years old, wring her hands profusely as though they were on fire. Her uplifted face was bathed in tears as she cried out. You could sense God on these children so strongly that the ushers did not touch them after initially helping them. They just stood, watched, and cried.

Several adults lay on their faces—motionless. Others stood watching in awe through eyes blurred by tears. Several times I looked behind me and saw the pastor with his face in his hands, weeping. His wife had collapsed in tears in the choir loft.

Later the pastor wrote a letter describing the evening from his vantage point. Though his account is similar, I felt it was important as another perspective.

Sunday, November 3, 1996, will be a day I will never forget. I believe it foreshadows what God is about to do in the earth. John ministered in the evening service on the fear of the Lord then declared, "We must let Jesus be Master in every area of our lives and we must now completely surrender to Him as our Lord."

We worshipped for a short while, then John said, "I sense the Holy Spirit moving now in this place." At this point, I heard sobs rise from the children, youth and adults. Adults began to come to the altar weeping and sobbing. John then said, "God is touching the children, the children are going to be touched powerfully by the Lord." He then encouraged the children who were being touched by God's presence to come.

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I saw children run to the altar weeping uncontrollably: this included my sons [3] and daughter, all over children on their faces and knees called and screamed out to Jesus. Some shook and wrung their hands profusely as the fire of God moved in their midst. Nearly a hundred crowded the altars, while waves of God's Spirit shot through the sanctuary. I watched as one child after another fell on top of each other, no one had touched them. They looked like dominoes. For an hour and a half [it was an hour and fifteen minutes but I did not want to change what he wrote], we were saturated by God's presence. Near the end of the service parents and children embraced and wept as God knit their hearts.

One ten year old told us, as he lay on the floor, he saw rays of brilliant white light shooting down from the ceiling and falling on everyone. Several adults in the congregation and choir repeated the same thing. No one left service until 11:00 P.M. Children were carried out as they still wept.

I am still receiving reports of changed families; children are witnessing and obeying, etc. As pastor I can truly say my home and children are different.

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The report given by the young man who saw the brilliant rays of white light shooting down from the ceiling got my attention. In the book of Habakkuk, we read,

LORD, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.
Renew them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy.
God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah

His glory covered the heavens
and his praise filled the earth.
His splendor was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden. (Hab. 3:2–4 NIV)

I'm sure this young man had no idea that Habakkuk recorded anything like this so long ago. With our eyes, we witnessed what Joel had prophesied, “Your sons and daughters will prophesy, . . . your young men will see visions” (2:28 NIV). The ten-year-old was describing a similar vision already described in Scripture without prior knowledge.

Another boy proclaimed with boldness, “Mom, the fast isn't over.” Not only were his words prophetic, but he verbalized the desire of numerous others. These young people had experienced the presence of the living God, and their lives were changed. They wanted to press on and not stop.

Later that night the pastor's wife shared with us the Scriptures God had spoken to her about what had transpired:

Therefore also now, says the Lord, turn and keep on coming to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning [until every hindrance is removed and the broken fellowship is restored]. Rend your hearts and not your garments. (Joel 2:12–13 AMPLIFIED)

As she read these verses, my heart burned within. The phrase “keep on coming” described that church's resolve. The people were set in their pursuit of His heart. They would not draw back.

God instructs us to rend our hearts and not our garments. I have seen believers and churches that by appearance seem to have it all together, yet not touch the heart of God as this church had. The reason? They may fast, hold prayer meetings, and abstain from outward indulgences, causing them to look good as far as the

outward “garment” is concerned, but inwardly they conceal stubborn hearts. They still live for their own agendas rather than for the service of others. God is more impressed with inward submission than outward appearances of Christianity. Joel continued,

Blow the trumpet in Zion,
declare a holy fast,
call a sacred assembly.
Gather the people,
consecrate the assembly;
bring together the elders,
gather the children,
those nursing at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room
and the bride her chamber. (Joel 2:15–16 NIV)

The fire in my heart spread as she continued to read. It described exactly how God had instructed this church just forty days earlier. When the prophetic word was trumpeted, everyone was to seek God. From the leaders to the children, no one was exempt. Continuing, she read,

And it shall come to pass afterward
That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
Your young men shall see visions.
And also on My menservants and on My maidservants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days. (Joel 2:28–29 NKJV)

“And it shall come to pass afterward.” I have heard this verse quoted repeatedly. In fact, since I was first saved, Joel 2:28–29 has been frequently referenced by believers and ministers alike. There is

talk of sons and daughters prophesying and seeing visions along with the great wonders and signs of the Holy Spirit, yet often the word afterward was ignored in the discussions and preaching. If something is prophesied to happen afterward, then something significant must take place before-ward: the church's response to the trumpet, by drawing near to God.

God responds powerfully when we draw near. We must come close when He calls. Another important element is timing. This is where many believers miss it. I believe as you read this book, you'll realize that though believers have an open invitation to come to the Lord through prayer and fellowship at any time, there are times and seasons when He calls us for specific purposes. During these, timing becomes crucial, for if we do not respond, we will miss the blessing He desires to give us.

The focus in these times is on obedience rather than our own will or desire. God is much more pleased with obedience than sacrifice. I have seen churches that fast regularly and pray around the clock with precious members sacrificing sleep to fill their prayer slots. Yet this does not guarantee His power and presence. Too often I have seen these churches lack what the church I wrote about had in abundance. They had the form; they just did not have the heart.

It is the same with individuals. I have seen many who fast and pray religiously, yet they lack the liberty, power, and intimate knowledge of God that I have seen in others who have not sacrificed nearly as much, but responded to the Spirit of God's leading.

The church heeded the calling voice of God. In the next year and a half they doubled in size. In fact, they had just finished building the auditorium that we met in that night, and within six months they had to start another building program for a larger sanctuary.

The pastor and I spoke frequently for months afterward. He said, "John, our Sunday morning second service, which starts at 10:00 A.M., keeps getting out between two and three o'clock in the

afternoon.” One Sunday he called and said that he had to tell the people, “Please, go home.” He said they just stood there looking at him, not wanting to leave.

God fulfilled His word. Those meetings were the most powerful we had experienced. Through our cooperation with His Spirit and our obedience to His leading, He had His way. Three years have passed, yet the pastor still receives reports from that service. The fruit has remained. I have ministered there several times since and have seen only an increase of passion and genuine hunger for God.

A FORETASTE OF WHAT'S COMING

A year earlier, I was in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, ministering in the nation's largest Bible school for a week of services. At our eighth service, there was a very similar experience, but this one lasted only about five to ten minutes. God's Spirit fell on the students and many others in attendance. It is another meeting I will never forget. The morning after the service while I was in prayer, God spoke to me, “What you saw yesterday, you will see happening all over, for it is one of the final moves of My Spirit, which will occur in the church.” He showed me how this move of His Spirit would yield the fruit of true holiness in the church and prepare it for the harvest to come. God will ignite His people with an intense, burning passion like we have never known before.

I do not believe you hold this book by chance; rather, by divine providence you have it to create a hunger and prepare your heart for what He is about to do. We must ready ourselves for His second coming. The apostle John recorded: “Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7 NKJV).

We are that bride of Christ, and we have a crucial role in making ourselves ready to be united with Him. I want to reemphasize this point: we are to make ourselves ready. It is a divine merger. He does

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not do all of it for us! It is our response to His provision. He provides the grace, and we embrace the fire. He is not coming back for a church spotted and blemished by the world. He will return for a pure bride whose heart is ablaze with true holiness.

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