

The Garden

Several years ago I was preaching in Nicaragua. My interpreter at the time, had taken the evening off. So I traveled with my friend Ixil to a church that gathered in a building near the trash dumps of Matagalpa. When we entered the building, I was shocked to see how many people had come to worship and how full the place had gotten by the time the music started.

I remember many things about that night. An old woman who was blind came in, being led around by a younger woman who appeared to be her daughter. Another man snuck in stealthily just before the meeting began and found a plastic chair at the back of the room, sitting quietly with his back turned slightly toward the crowd. The worship team was a full band accompanied by several young people dressed in matching pastel costumes, complete with flowing scarves and patent leather shoes. The whole setting added up to what appeared to be a peculiar mix of demographics in a strange part of the mountainous community.

As the worship began to play, the music was overwhelming and loud. I even remember placing tissues in my ears to shield my eardrums from the extreme decibels being pumped into the sanctuary. The young people, clad in their pastel regalia, began to dance. Their movements were choreographed and well-rehearsed. The flowing scarves moved fluid through the air and the stomping and sliding patent leather shoes appeared silent under the weight of the gigantic sound coming out of the PA. Then it happened.

As I began to take in the culture and worship atmosphere through all my senses, I entered into worship. When you feel lost in a crowd, get lost in the crowd. I sang and prayed in the Spirit, while the Latin lyrics lunged into the night, and within just a few minutes, I was in a vision.

I saw a great hall in Heaven. A room adorned in pure white light with hundreds of people who were talking and fellowshiping as if a great celebration was taking place. Not a celebration like one might see at New Year or even Christmas with family. This was different. There was peace and security, and those who were there had no cares or worries whatsoever. But there was one problem—no one was speaking to me or acknowledging that I was even in the room.

I was not deterred or discouraged since the atmosphere was one of joy, and quickly scanned the room to find a staircase near the room's edge. At first, I was unable to see if they were functioning stairs or simply aesthetic. So being who I am, I investigated.

The stairs were covered in vines and roots, leading up to a gate, overgrown by vegetation and seemed likely to not open. I went up carefully, stopped on the penultimate step, and looked out over the crowded room to see if anyone would notice my departure. Not a soul! Not a single person even glanced in my direction. At that moment, I felt alone and jilted, but adventurous—so I pushed the gate open.

As I stepped through the veil into an unseen world, I immediately saw my savior. He was there waiting for me with a smile on His face and His hand outstretched. I took His hand and the gate closed behind me as the sounds of the party below faded. Without saying a word, He took off my jacket and I removed my shirt, exposing my bare chest and arms. At first, it seemed strange, but then He spoke to me without words and asked me to raise my arms to the side. As I stood there, the King of Glory began to wash my face, arms, back, and chest. It was as though I was a child and my mother was washing my face for supper. I felt such peace and acceptance.

After this, He placed a robe on me. The robe itself seemed to dance and radiate light. It appeared weightless and clean—pure. Jesus then moved to the side, motioned me forward, and said, “this is your secret place,” and there revealed a garden. It was greener than anything I have ever seen, with a labyrinth of hedges that stood ten feet tall. He told me that this place is always available to me. It’s my secret place. Mine. My very own. I go there often now and visit with my King. Over the years, He has revealed more and more behind the hedges, but I am not at liberty to share that just yet. Just know that He is always there, somewhere, waiting for me to find Him and refresh my spirit in His presence. Sometimes I tend the garden and take in the sounds and smells. Sometimes I just sit and encounter Him as my friend who eagerly waits for me.

By the end of the meeting in that little concrete church building, near a trash dump in Nicaragua, that little old woman had begun to see. That man who snuck in the back door saw an angel and cried out to God in awe. Probably a hundred other encounters and miracles took place, leaving everyone in the building encouraged, healed, saved, and free to walk as children of God.

Yesterday my wife and I attended a funeral with our fifteen-year-old son Drake. The service started and was astonishingly warm considering the circumstances. Our friend Cristina, a mother and wife of only forty-one years, had passed just a few days ago. She was quite a special woman. A joyful and vibrant person who gave as much as she could to the world around her. A school teacher and youth minister with her husband, and one of those faces always beaming with a bright smile and big brown eyes that shined.

Amanda (my wife) and I were not as close to her as others, but she and her family had been to some of our house church meetings over the years, and they always seemed affected by the presence of God and seemed sincere in their search. We were jealous that we weren’t part of the inner circle, but understanding. Cristina was special, and the packed house was evidence of the footprint that she has left in this world.

As the service continued, some other friends from Cristina’s local church came to sing a song, and the leader stated, “Cristina would want y’all to worship...” Without missing a beat, the Southern auditorium filled made a bustling sound and everyone stood to their feet as the music started to pour out of the speakers. When the lyrics first began to fall upon our ears, we heard:

Take me back to the garden,
Lead me back to the moment I heard your voice.
Take me back to communion,
Lead me back to the moment I saw your face.
And it was oh so simple,
It was easy to love,
No space between us,
It was easy to trust.

Cause you are closer,
Closer than my skin,
And you are in
the air I'm breathing in.
And here's where the dead things
Come back to living
And I feel my heart beating again.
Feels so good to
Know you are my friend...

As this remarkable moment touched my heart and the hundreds of other hearts in the room, we all picture Cristina with Jesus, and for a moment I was jealous again. I was jealous because she is in the place that I long to be...with Jesus. She is in His arms, robed in light, above the crowd, standing in a place where life may never be touched by the slightest shadow. She now knows Jesus in ways that those of us who have not yet graduated to glory may only fantasize with completely inadequate, fleeting thoughts. She is home, surrounded by the majesty of a garden that will never know seasons or unfruitfulness.

Like that little old woman in Nicaragua, Cristina is seeing things for the first time. She is encountering angels like that man who snuck in the back door. She is witnessing the multitudes of saints who have gone before us, abide in the fullness of His love, and are forever encouraged, healed, saved, and free to walk as children of God.

The remainder of the service was filled with extraordinary moments of raw splendor and heartwarming grace. I wept and worshipped with the others as we sang and rejoiced in celebration of her life. A woman who wanted to be buried in her bell-bottoms, with bright clothes. I felt God in that place, in a special way, a powerful way, and I left the sanctuary of that church, stirred to have intimacy and friendships.

As we walked back into the world outside, the sky was overcast, and soon after it began to get cold and rainy on our way back home. The moment had passed.

This morning as I am reflecting on this experience, my emotions are signaling love. Not because I am sad or dwelling on our loss. I feel love because Jesus desires to meet us all.

I encourage you today. Find your secret place and meet Jesus there. If you do not have one, ask Him, and He will provide one to you. He is more than a friend...He is closer than your skin....He is so easy to love...He is so easy to trust.

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