

# **Joel Osteen Will Dedicate Morris Cerullo's Legacy Center**

Joel Osteen will reportedly attend the Morris Cerullo International Legacy Center—newly constructed in San Diego, California—on April 2 to formally dedicate the center to the Lord. Osteen's appearance will be part of an "opening ceremony" and dedication event taking place from March 31 to April 5, according to a recent video update by Cerullo's ministry.

In the video, Greg Hodson—vice president of television at Morris Cerullo World Evangelism (MCWE)—says, "Joel Osteen will be here on April 2 to dedicate the Center. It's going to be an awful lot of fun."

The video also features a behind-the-scenes look inside the Legacy Center with the Center's executive director, Jim Penner.

Watch the full video [here](#).

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## **Morris Cerullo: How to Achieve Victory and Power Over the Devil**

Cerullo says the key to winning the spiritual battle against

the enemy is to know your identity in Christ and to not be swayed from it. He says if you are “just talking words,” you lack power over the enemy, but if you know the truth of those words and the power behind them, you can command even the devil around.

In archive footage from Cerullo’s Video School of Ministry, Cerullo points to Jesus’ victory over the devil in the wilderness as an example of this.

“Two thousand years ago, how did [Jesus] defeat Satan?” Cerullo says. “One of the very key manifestations in the life of Jesus in facing Satan was His positioning power. He faced Satan from a position of knowing. ... This is our strength. ... If you know that... you are positioned for victory.”

Watch the full clip here, in which Cerullo teaches further on Jesus’ identity.

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## Count It All Loss

If you’ve ever heard a song by the Christian rock band Skillet, then you’ve probably heard Jen Ledger. At 18, Ledger joined the best-selling band in late 2007 as the band’s drummer and backup vocalist. In 2018, she released her solo debut EP Ledger. Today, she’s a firsthand witness to how the Holy Spirit is moving among some of the darkest bands and music scenes in the country.

Ledger talked to Charisma about her radical testimony of coming to Jesus, the Holy Spirit nudge that made her audition for Skillet and why so many believers are uncomfortable with sacrificing to follow Jesus.

*This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here:*

Berglund: Can you share your testimony?

Ledger: Basically, I grew up in England, a place called Coventry. I kind of knew about Jesus. I grew up in a church of England church, so it's kind of traditional. It's not quite Catholic, but I knew about Jesus. I knew He died for me. I knew a few stories like Noah. But that was as far as my faith went for my whole life while I lived in England. I never really understood the gospel. I never knew the power of it. I heard that Jesus wanted to know me. But as far as it actually impacting my life, that wasn't until I was 16 years old.

I came over to America to do a Bible worship school called the School of Worship. It's basically like a discipleship thing. I didn't really know what I was getting into. That was when I heard the gospel for the first time, and it was very clear to me I had been missing the point the whole time.

My brothers had previously done the worship school a few years before me, and it made me realize just how far from God I really was. Before they left, they were kind of party boys—they had naked chicks all over their walls and would go out clubbing to see if they could make out with some girls or such—and then they came back from America telling me about Jesus. They tore all the posters down from their walls. They said, "We've been missing the point the whole time. God is real. He loves you. He wants to know you. You can hear his voice."

They came back so radically transformed that it made me realize, "Oh, wow. I don't know what they're talking about." They honestly kind of freaked me out. They were the first people I met that were Spirit-filled, and to be 100% honest,

it kind of was freaky. It wasn't anything I'd ever experienced before. But the fact that they were so 100% all-in Jesus, and the fact that their lives had just completely transformed from hearing the gospel and from being filled with the Spirit, it was really impactful for me.

So when I came to America, I heard the gospel presented. It came at a time where I was willing to finally let go of everything I'd known in England. I had grown up popular in school, good at school, living a nice life. But I knew that everything I loved about my life didn't compare to the truth of knowing Jesus. So when I came to America, I thought, OK, Lord, whatever You want. If this is true and I'm able to know You, there is nothing worth holding on to that compares to You. That was when my life massively transformed. The power of the gospel, the truth of what Jesus has done—the actual day-to-day living in the presence of God, seeking Him, walking in the Spirit—was when everything changed for me.

I was 16 years old, just falling in love with God and realizing the Bible was real. For me, when I got saved, everything became incredibly exciting to me. So I'd read about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and I'd say, 'Oh my gosh, He saved them from fire!' I was just on fire for Jesus and excited to know Him. I read these stories with new eyes. To know that this is the same God today who wants to know me, that empowers me, who lives within me—that just blew my mind.

A year later, Skillet was holding auditions for the new drummer. At that point, I really didn't care about drums. I was so excited to be used by God, to be living for Him and to find out that He was real, honestly. So when they asked me to audition, I at first said no, because I just really hated performing. I hated being in front of people. I was pretty insecure at playing drums anyway. I looked to my left and right and saw so many people that were better at it than I was. But I was praying about it, and I really felt like the Lord was prompting me to try out for Skillet. So I very much

went to the audition purely out of obedience.

Actually, I was really reluctant to do it. I didn't want to audition. I thought, Surely, God's going to teach me humility or some character-building thing, because I know for a fact He would never want me to be a drummer. I suck at it, and I would never be good enough. It was very challenging and stretching for me to even show up to the audition. In the end, the very thing I thought I sucked at and that could never be used in my life was my drumming.

Obviously, the audition went well. God had an incredibly different plan for me.

So my testimony is such a whirlwind. I got saved, and a year later, God brought me on this adventure: "I can do impossible things with you. Whatever you think you can't do, whatever you think is unusable about you, in My hand, it's completely transformed." From very early on in my walk with the Lord, I was able to experience His power. I stepped out in obedience and saw Him meet me in a way that, even now, when I get up and play drums with Skillet, I'm reminded of the faithfulness of God. With Him, things that aren't possible become possible. It's been a beautiful journey of being dependent on Him and seeing Him help me every step of the way.

Berglund: One of the things I find most interesting about Skillet is the fact that you guys are this incredibly successful musical band, but you're also ministry-focused. It's not just about the success for you guys. You use music to create opportunities to share the gospel with many people who wouldn't ordinarily hear it. Can you talk about the heart behind that?

Ledger: We play both the Christian market and the active rock market. That includes mainstream rock festivals, and then also festivals with TobyMac and Hillsong. As you can imagine, that's massive culture shock. But what's even more interesting

is, you know, in the Christian world, I think we can sometimes scare some of the Christian fans because they say, "They can't be Christian. They have tattoos, and they wear black, and they scream." It's funny, because at the same time, sometimes mainstream rock fans or the "powers that be" in the rock world say, "They're too Christian. That's not sex, drugs and rock'n' roll. That's not what we're really about here, either."

So Skillet has lived in no-man's land, in the middle of these two genres, for basically its entire 22-year career. It's really interesting, because I just love being a part of something that so clearly only God could have done. For a band to last 22 years is kind of unheard of, especially when you don't fully belong in either of the markets that you live in. I've had this time to sit with John and Korey Cooper and hear all of the obstacles that have miraculously been overcome. You can see the hand of God on the band in a way that's just undeniable.

What I love about Skillet is that—even though maybe we look a little bit scary and our music may not be the typical Christian music you'd hear—we're a band of incredibly passionate believers. I just feel like it's been such an honor to serve with John and Korey for the last 12 years of my life. They're so radical for Jesus. They've really taken me under their wing to show me this is what it means to live for Christ. And they are just people who will never compromise. They're so radical. They don't care if people don't get it. They know that this is what God's called them to right now. And they've just given their all to it for so long that it makes me feel truthfully honored to have been a part of what they are doing in the world.

What's so beautiful is we play some of these rock festivals with some of the heaviest and darkest bands in the whole world. It will literally be the bands that are the most famous for very dark, dark music. It's where people run to get away from anything holy, maybe to celebrate anger. People that are

hurting really connect with this music, you know? It feels like the enemy's playing ground. People run to these places when they've been burned or hurt and want to celebrate things that just feel good to them.

So what's crazy is that God gave us the grounds to step onto the same stages of some of the darkest bands in the world, and we get up there and we sing about His hope, His truth and His light. And it's some of the times where I've felt the presence of God the thickest in my entire life, where you can sense His anointing and power. Sometimes light just shines brighter when it's in a dark room. Those are the moments where I can't help but celebrate and, in my heart, just think, Wow, only God! Only God could bring us here.

I think for anyone who may be reading and has been confused about Skillet's music or look or whatever it might be, I would love to share our heart with you. And that is that in the hand of our God, Skillet is a really powerful weapon that reaches into some of the darkest circumstances and shines His light. There are places in the world that can feel too far or too dark. No one can reach into there. But our God can. He's just so faithful, and no one is too far from Him. There is no circumstance too dark for Him. And I just feel really honored to be a part of what He's doing. Obviously, I wouldn't say, 'Hey, everyone reading, go to the darkest places on your own.' It's somewhere God has called us to, because He's given us the ground, and we're part of a team that keeps each other safe. But be excited for what God is doing. Be excited to see how He reaches into those depths and He touches people's lives that you would think, They'd never care about this. The big, scary guy with tattoos may all of a sudden start crying because God's touched him. It's so wonderful and beautiful and miraculous to be a part of something like that.

Berglund: From that perspective, how are you seeing the Holy Spirit moving in the next generation?

Ledger: I feel like that's such a big question, and I'm not like the smartest person in the world, but I can tell you what I'm passionate to see in the next generation.

I've got to be careful what I say, because I don't want it to sound more edgy or controversial than I would mean it to sound. But, being a part of Skillet, which may not fit the typical mold, has sadly exposed a part of Christianity that's a little bubble. It's Christians who only feel comfortable speaking to Christians. Obviously, this isn't everybody; I am not lumping everyone into this. But being a part of Skillet and having a lot of Christians [say], "You guys played with Slipknot, so we won't support you anymore"—we've just had a lot of resistance.

I guess what I would like to say to the younger generation, and what the Holy Spirit is doing, is we need to be a people who are passionate and clear about the gospel. I think in our hopes and desires to be seeker-friendly, to be cool and trendy—in some ways, it's just isolated us. We don't want to let the gospel affect us. We're so desperate to fit in and be a part of the world and be trendy and cool that I think we've actually lost the power of the gospel within that. Jesus is bigger than we know He is.

We forget that the gospel itself is power. The gospel itself is the only thing that matters. It doesn't have to be the gospel said in a way that makes it sound cool. I've sadly met a lot of believers who are so desperate to make the gospel cool, when actually, they don't end up standing up for what Jesus actually meant.

We just ran into a guy called Mylon LeFevre. He's this rock star who in his 20s, he was playing with the Beatles and The Who. He was the guy whose career was completely taking off. And he got saved and gave everything up. He spoke to the pastor of his church and was like, "I don't know how to live for Jesus." And the pastor said, "Come show up here at 8 a.m.

tomorrow and clean the toilets.” So this guy who came from money, wealth, esteem, everything you could ever want that the world can offer—he gave up all of that so he could know Jesus. He’s this guy with tattoos and long hair. He becomes a part of this church, and he’s even getting judged from within the church because of the way he dresses and whatever. So then he buys himself a suit and continues to serve God by cleaning the toilets.

I was really struck by hearing his testimony and his story, because Christians today, we can kind of try and want to make Jesus look cool. We want to have thousands of followers on Instagram and make Jesus trendy. But I think we don’t need to change the gospel, because the gospel is a powerful thing on its own. The Bible is so clear that you can consider it all a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. And maybe it means I’m not as popular. Maybe it means I’m not as famous.

For Skillet, we would have gotten a lot further in the rock world if we stopped proclaiming the name of Jesus. We’ve had people even tell us, “Can you guys just turn it down with the Jesus thing? Because then you’d become a way more successful and bigger band.” For me in my solo career, I’d be a lot easier to sell in the mainstream world if there were certain things [that] right now I won’t compromise on. I won’t sing about certain things. I won’t dress a certain way that, yeah, maybe would sell more records. But I consider it all loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

I just think that in culture today, there is a danger of confusing the gospel with being fulfilled, healthy, wealthy and blessed. I think we can get our calling mixed up with the gospel, like: ‘I love Jesus as long as He fulfills my heart. Or as long as He uses me as a musician. Or as long as He uses me on a platform that’s big.’ I just think that we’ve confused being radical for Jesus for something that it’s actually not.

Are you willing to just serve Him and be invisible and lose all things to know Him? This is something that alarms me.

I feel like if we're not careful, we can miss the basic 101 of Christianity, which is your life is not your own anymore. It belongs to Him. So maybe it means He calls you to be in a rock band and play drums, even though you hate performing in front of people. Maybe it means He calls you to an office job you hate but maybe He wants to use you there to bring the kingdom of heaven to the people around you. I think we forget that knowing Jesus might actually cost you something. It's like the parable of the treasure in the field—when you find that treasure, you sell everything to have it.

I feel that God's calling me to do music. There's not really much room for a personal life for me right now, you know? It's not like I can settle down and have a family or find a husband. But I really believe that this is what God's calling me to right now. And it might actually cost me something. It might cost me the things that I really want in my life. But if that's what it means to serve Him wholeheartedly, and to run the race that's set before me, I consider it all loss to know Him and to serve Him and to know and be obedient to Him.

... If you're suffering for the gospel, it's something you should rejoice in. I just think that because of Western Christianity, we've got a lot of weak believers. We have one trial and then think God doesn't love us anymore. The Bible is just so clear about suffering with Him—it's an honor. I mean, look at Paul's life. How many times was he was put in prison or shipwrecked? All sorts of stuff happened to him, but you don't see him saying, "Oh, I think God doesn't love me anymore." He just says, "You know, I consider it all a loss." He just wants to run the race with his eyes fixed on the prize of Jesus, no matter where it takes him, no matter the trials he goes through.

I would just love to challenge the next generation of

believers to study the Word and go back to basics. Make sure you know the Gospels for the actual gospel—not the Westernized Christian version of it. Read and study the disciples and the people who suffered for Jesus. Study the people in the Old Testament who died in faith but knew who God was. Despite how hard their lives were, He was worth it. He is the treasure at the end. They had an eternal perspective, knowing that life is just a breath, knowing that it's a short window you get to live here. It's going to be hard. But their faith was stronger than that. And they still prayed to their God and served Him and knew who He was, despite perhaps being unpopular here because of it.

... I hope that anyone reading this will just feel challenged and inspired to run the race set before them. Even if you're feeling weak in your faith, just remember to fix your eyes on the end—not what's going on right now, but the eternal glory of what's ahead of us.

—Find Jen Ledger on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

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## **Love, Not Labels**

Pastor J.J. Vasquez was skeptical when God first called him to plant a church in Winter Park, Florida. The demographics didn't make sense. His preaching style seemed like a strange fit. He saw better locations elsewhere. But he obeyed.

Now his church, Journey Church, is a thriving and diverse young church of Spirit-filled Christians. Vasquez told Charisma about his early call to ministry, the value of a diverse church and the trends that both excite and worry him about the next generation of Christians.

*This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here:*

Berglund: Can you start by sharing your testimony with me?

Vasquez: I was born and raised in New York City. Ministry was never really in my family's trajectory, besides my dad being a volunteer youth leader at his church. But somehow the Lord called me at a super young age, sent me to youth camp, and from that moment on, I just felt the leading to be in ministry. There was a call at one of the camps to meet this person called the Holy Spirit. I went up and got prayed for, and ever since then, I just knew that I wanted to serve God with the whole of my heart.

When I was 12, that happened, and then I shared my experience with my lead pastor at my church. He gave me an opportunity to preach to the children's church. I did that and, after preaching to the children's church, did a call for salvation. I saw like eight kids raise their hands to give their hearts to Jesus. I don't know if they meant it, or if it was because I was giving out lollipops or what, but I shared that experience with my pastor. So he said, "Wow, that's awesome," and then asked me, at age 12, to preach on a Sunday to our entire church.

That's where a big part of my heart to open up doors for the next generation comes from. Somebody did that for me, right? I think we're all standing on the shoulders of the leaders and pastors who went before us. From that point on, I just never looked back. I knew that ministry was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I continued to preach and travel and minister as an evangelist.

I went through some ups and downs in my teenage years. I think there are two sides to the salvation story when you grow up in

church. When you meet Jesus later on in your life, in your 20s or 30s, those people look back at those of us who grew up in church and think, Man, you're so lucky. But the other side of growing up in church is it breeds a sense of familiarity, and familiarity breeds contempt. You don't really appreciate what's special about this relationship with Jesus and what's special about lives being changed. That's my story. I kind of lost what was special about church and slipped away. I kind of felt like God had robbed me of some of my youth. When I was younger, I wanted to kind of live the life that all my friends were living.

I like to joke around and say that the last time I got saved was when I was 17 at a youth camp. Because between 12 and 17, I might have gotten saved like 30-40 times. Anybody who's been a Christian in their youth, they know what I'm talking about. But at 17, I really decided to give my heart to Jesus and fully commit to Him once more, and I've never looked back since. It's been an amazing journey.

I helped plant a church in Gainesville, started an internship program and completed my master's degree at Southeastern University Divinity. I was the district youth director for Florida multicultural districts, so I oversaw about 400 youth ministries from Miami to the Carolinas, where I put on events just like the one where I met Jesus and got filled with the Holy Spirit. With a youth pastor at a great church here in Orlando, I wrote a book, and then ended up becoming a professor at Southeastern University, teaching youth and family ministry.

Almost five years ago, I felt the Lord beginning to pull on my heart to plant a church. So I sat down with my wife and our pastor, and we decided to do it. God led us to Winter Park, Florida. On Sept. 18, 2016, we launched, and it's been a fun ride ever since. Now we're living here in Winter Park, leading a church and having the time of our lives.

Berglund: You mentioned that you're very passionate about opening up doors for the next generation. What are some of the ways you try to do that at your church?

Vasquez: We have a local college, Journey Leadership Academy. We partner with Southeastern University, so we're an extension site of theirs, where we offer associate's and bachelor's degrees in leadership and other disciplines. For us, that's an opportunity to raise up leaders. We've got about seven students who are in that right now, pursuing ministry and learning leadership. I believe in creating opportunities, whether it's on stage or behind closed doors.

I think too often we wait for people to be good at whatever it is they do before we let them shine. Something that I like to tell other pastors is, "You know, you sucked at one time. You sucked at what you did at one time, and somebody knew you were bad, and they still let you do what you're doing today. They didn't wait for you to have it all together. They made a way." I think we have to make a way for others if we're ever going to see our ministry grow beyond us.

I like to say you need to have a high standard of excellent but a low standard of excellence when it comes to empowering others. What I mean by that is, not everybody that comes to you is going to be excellent. But when they come to you, wherever they are, call them higher to a level of excellence. That's how we do it through our college, stage opportunities and leadership opportunities. We want to make sure that their voices are being heard.

Berglund: Our former news director here at Charisma, Jessilyn Lancaster, visited your church firsthand. One of the things she told me about going there was that she was struck by the diversity of the church—both ethnically and generationally. Has that been a very intentional process for you and the leadership team?

Vasquez: I think it was intentional on God's part, for sure. We just rolled with what we felt God was doing. For those who can't tell, I'm 33 and Puerto Rican, and I was born and raised in New York City. And God called us to plant a church in Winter Park, Florida. If you are not familiar with central Florida, Winter Park is not like super-duper diverse. Winter Park is mostly Caucasian, and you're either in college-going to one of the two amazing colleges we have close by: UCF and Rollins—or you're older and retired. When we did our research, that's what Winter Park is.

Church planters say you want to plant a church in a place where people are within your wingspan age-wise—like 10 years up, 10 years down—and also ethnicity, because people want to go to church with other people who look like them. That's not what we promote, but that's apparently what people want. So when my wife and I came out of all these church planting trainings, we thought, Well, forget Winter Park. We need to plant a church in Kissimmee, you know what I'm saying? (For those who don't know, Kissimmee's like little Puerto Rico here in Central Florida. It's 90% Hispanic. So we thought, Man, if we've got a church there, we'll reach a ton of people.)

But we really felt the Lord pressing Winter Park on our heart, so we said, "All right, well, we'll see what God does." We were really nervous about launching. We didn't know if we would resonate with the community. And then God started sending us people of different ages, races and ethnicities. So when I would go out to coffee with some of our early attenders, I'd ask them, "Hey, why are you here? Just being honest, because I want to know. There's a ton of great churches in central Florida. You picked us, and you're here, and you're serving, and you're committed and you're invested. Why?" And they called out the diversity. They said, "We like this. We want to be at a church where people look different than us."

I give the people in our church a ton of credit. It's so easy

to worship with people who look like you. But it takes another level of courage and commitment to a vision to walk into a building where the pastor is not in your age group, where the person to your left or to your right doesn't have the same skin color as you.

As much as we would like to say that we pushed for it—and we do talk about it and make sure we get diversity on stage—I do believe it was really in the heart of God for this particular city. God knew what he was doing. And we love it, man, because everybody brings a different flavor, and everybody brings a different perspective.

It's so great to be in a small group, which I really think is the most powerful kind of room for diversity. I think it is healing when you're in a small group and there are people who are a different skin color than you, of a different age group than you, possibly even a different sexual orientation than you, and you're just doing life with these people. You're being forced to understand them, because they get a chance to open up, and they share their heart and life. You hear the stuff they're going through. It's a whole 'nother level of empathy.

As far as the divide and the tension we see in America today, I think I speak for a lot of Christians when I say, as important as politics are—and I was a political science major—I really believe when it comes to a lot of that pain that we're feeling, I think the church is going to be where the healing takes place honestly. I mean, the only thing that's going to bond people together is either going to be a massive tragedy—I lived in New York during 9/11, so I saw people of different faiths, colors and ages all come together after massive tragedy—or the same thing that binds us together in heaven, which is worship. And I hope it's worship. I hope that's the thing that heals us and brings us all together.

Berglund: We often note that among the next generation, there

are increasing rates of being unaffiliated with any religious belief or not being open to religion. How do you use faith as a unifying force in a generation that often says they don't believe in God?

Vasquez: The Orlando Sentinel, which is the second largest publication in the state of Florida—definitely the largest in Orlando—was doing an article on Millennials leaving the church. So the reporter came to do an article on our church; it was just a crazy happenstance. The intention was to tell the story of how this generation is leaving the church. That's what the grand narrative was. And when the reporter came, she saw so many young people worshipping that she changed the story. The story was no longer about them leaving the church; the story was about them finding a place.

So I tend to rail a bit against that narrative. I believe it in a lot of ways. But I think when the church is healthy, and the church is doing the right things the right way, I don't think this generation is averse to faith. I think they're averse to religion. I think they're averse to labels. I think they're averse to being categorized. But they're not averse to faith. I think they're more open to faith today than ever, honestly.

I think it's more that they don't want to be against something; they want to be for something. For a long time, the message in church was what we were against. There's a shift that's taking place to focus on what we're for. When we make that really clear—we're for Jesus, people, love, restoration, hope, process, reconciliation, grace—I think they run to the banner of Christianity. So I don't think they're anti-religion. I think they're anti-label and even anti-anti, if that's even a thing. They don't want to be against anything. But when you tell them what we're for, that becomes a rallying cry they can come behind.

Berglund: How do you then see the Holy Spirit at work in the

next generation?

Vasquez: I think He's at work in the same way He's been at work in every generation. We know that the Holy Spirit's job on earth at this point in history is to draw men to Christ. I don't see that mission statement changing. I think it's taking a new form. I think that He's operating through different faces. He's operating through different mediums like social media, TV and video. But I think it's the same mission, man. I think he's just trying to get people to know who Jesus is.

I think if we're going to see an impact evangelically, to see people's lives change, we're going to need to lean into the Holy Spirit. Great communication skills alone aren't going to do it any longer. I think there are just so many great communicators, and there are so many great environments. We need to lean into Him longer.

What I do see is the message of the Holy Spirit—when it comes to empowering baptism, signs and wonders, miracles—becoming a lot more accessible to people than it was probably 10 years ago. Hillsong, one of the biggest churches in the world, has movies and albums, and they're winning Grammys. You listen to their pastor speak, and you know he's Holy Ghost-filled. You hear Carl Lentz preach a message, saying, "Hey, we believe in the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We believe in the power. We believe that God can raise the dead and open the eyes of the blind." But he's also best friends with Justin Bieber.

So I see a shift where the message of Pentecost, if we can call it that, is making its way mainstream. And it's becoming less weird. People used to identify the Holy Spirit as awkward or weird. I remember growing up, and anytime someone ever spoke about the Holy Spirit, they would be like, "And we're not talking about snakes and stuff like that." I never understood that, because I never grew up in a church where there were snakes! It just blew my mind that we even had to mention that to people. But they mentioned it a lot, because

they wanted people to know we weren't that. But I think the movement is becoming something else now.

So I'm excited. I'm excited for the future, because I think people are open to experiencing God in a supernatural way—not just in a way that makes sense to my reason, which probably was the message of the generation before. Everything had to make sense and it had to be reasonable and rational.

The gospel still makes sense. It's still reasonable. It's still rational. But I think there's another dimension that people are really opening up to, and that's the supernatural. So I'm pumped. I think when we make space for God in that way, really cool things can happen.

Berglund: Why do you think that the next generation is finding signs and wonders so much more accessible than previous generations did?

Vasquez: Yeah, I think it's the figureheads that we have now. I think there's some people at the front of the movement who are contemporary and mainstream, who people admire and respect, and they're bringing it into everyday conversation. It's being talked about. I think that some of the bigger churches, the churches that have greater influence in our church culture today, that people are following and are really having an impact, a lot of them are Spirit-filled churches. So it's just becoming more normal because it's becoming more present. It's just more around.

I mean, if you go back in the whole Holy Spirit movement, right, you're talking about the Azusa Street Revival in the early 1900s. But they were really on the outsides of society for the 1900s. Mainline churches still really had to lead: Protestant, Methodist, Lutheran, all those guys. There was still a slow decline over these last hundred years. And then where those churches declined, a lot of these evangelical churches where the Holy Spirit's a big part of the message

picked up. So now, there's a shift.

Now in this second century here, we're just seeing a lot of those churches being planted and carrying influence in art, music and even sports. The more public it becomes, the more the message gets spread. The other day I was watching a regular TV show, and somebody was talking about speaking in tongues on NBC. Even if they were making fun of it, I think that tells us how far the message has come about who the Holy Spirit is. They try and make jokes on TV that everybody will get, so that the audience can laugh. It's mainstream now. People know, and people are open.

Berglund: Earlier, you talked about how the reporter came to your church and her story changed, because what she thought she knew about what was going on was completely different than the actual reality when she stepped into the church. I guess I'm wondering, from your perspective, what are some other ways that God is changing the story? What are some ways where our conventional wisdom about how people interact with the church is changing?

Vasquez: I think that's one way. There is the narrative of young people leaving the church, but they're not.

I'll tell you one of the ways I'm concerned about the story of the church changing. I think that has a lot to do with the political environment that we live in. I'm afraid. I think anybody who knows a Christian—a good, healthy, Bible-believing Christian—knows that we are for tolerance, that we may share our beliefs, but we're not going to try and change them. Because I think that's actually one of the core messages of Christianity. We're not going to try and change anything. That's God's job. God does the changing. God does the convincing. We're here to love, teach and serve.

So one of the ways that I'm concerned with the message of Christianity being told is when it's told in the context of

bigotry, racism or hate. I definitely think there are people who carry the banner of Christ who don't represent him well. But that can be said about anything. Are all atheists evil? Absolutely not. But there are some who really make all atheists look bad. The same can be said for Muslims and Buddhists and any other group. I hope that people would have the wherewithal to understand that a segment of people who claim to have Christ as their Lord and Savior, that they don't represent us all. That they would do some research and know the story of Christianity and who Jesus was. He ate with the publican. He had lunch with the sinner and the tax collector and the prostitute, and He was for people. He loved people.

I'm afraid that in the next generation, there's going to be an idea that Christianity is hate-filled, and that if you don't agree with us, then you have no place with us. I don't believe that's the story of Christ at all. That's one of the ways I'm concerned about the story changing.

Berglund: Some of that is out of our control, but what parts of that are in our control where we can help prevent that story?

Vasquez: Understand what your world is. Where do you work? Where do you live? How are you representing Christ?

I don't put a lot of faith in social media. So my advice wouldn't be to make sure you like this or post that. I don't know that any of that changes anything. It's all just static out there. But what can we do in our own world? Who are we loving in our own world? Who are we making space for in our own world, at our table? How are we representing Christ in our families and in our friendships?

Everybody's looking for a platform nowadays. Everybody's looking for an opportunity. I think there may be a lot of preachers and pastors who put their sermons on YouTube in hopes of going viral and stuff like that. (And we do share

clips through social media and all that.) But I think the best platform you could ever have is your neighbors.

Bob Goff had a huge influence on me. I met him a couple times, but just reading his books, I love how simple he makes loving people. He says, "I think loving your neighbor means loving your neighbor." And I laugh when I read that because it does, doesn't it? I have a neighbor. When's the last time I've done something for my neighbor?

Loving the people on your block. Loving the people you go to class with. Loving the people you work with—especially people who don't think like you or act like you. I think that's a great litmus test right there.

Who are your friends? Does everybody you hang out with look like you and think like you? If so, are we doing a good job? Who are we protecting as well?

I think there are just some great ways to check on ourselves. I definitely don't have it all nailed down myself, either. But I'm trying. And I think as long as we're all trying, we can have a tremendous collective influence.

Berglund: I think that's great. One more question for you. In your own quiet time, when you're spending time with the Lord, what has God been laying on your heart recently?

Vasquez: For me, I feel the Holy Spirit and God telling me to just be who He created me to be. We live in a day and age where, because of social media, because of the internet, because of the transfer of information, we have so much access. We can hear all the best preachers. We can see all the best pastors. I don't even have to go to the bookstore. I can download a book on my phone immediately. There are so many voices.

This isn't the question that you asked, but I think we're living in a generation of some of the greatest preachers we've

ever heard. And we're not really appreciating it. Do you know why? Because of the access. I can listen to some of the best preachers in the world, then take that message, tweak it a little bit and preach it on Sunday, right? And it'd be great and we're all building on each other. We're all getting better. But the downside of that is that we might all start sounding the same. And I think God created me for my context and my people. By my people, I mean the people around me. And He created you for your people and your context. I think we all really need to trust that God didn't make a mistake when he made us.

He gave us the story that He gave us for a reason.

He gave us the gift that He gave us for a reason.

He gave us the talent that He gave us for a reason.

He gave us the friend that He gave us for a reason.

He gave us the job that He gave us for a reason.

Just own that and stop trying to be someone else somewhere else at another time or place. Just own it, man. Own it all. I think that's where our individual greatest influence and impact is going to be: in being ourselves.

When we moved to Winter Park, we talked about diversity. When I did the study and found out the majority of Winter Park is older, retired Caucasians, I said, "I'm going to change my whole preaching style. I'm gonna go Andy Stanley up in here, you know? I'm gonna get a table, and I'm gonna get a board, and I'm going to just do Andy Stanley."

I love Andy Stanley. I thought people would appreciate that. But those first four months of our church were miserable. Miserable! People stopped coming. It wasn't that Andy Stanley's style of communicating is bad. It's that it's Andy Stanley's style of communicating, and I'm not him.

And so after the first four months, I was like, “You know what? I’m just going back to being me and what God created me to be.” God created me to be a Latino, shouting-in-the-microphone type of preacher because I’m passionate and energetic, and that’s who He created me to be. And then the church took a turn, and it started growing and it went great, and a big part of that turn was me just being OK with being me, with who God created me to be.

I would say to all of our readers—who are living in an age of comparison—to trust that God got it right when He made you. Everything that your community needs and that He needs in this day and age is in you. Just be you, whatever that means. That’s where we’re going to make the biggest difference.

I want to learn. I want to hear from other pastors. I meet with other pastors often; I’m always asking questions. But in the back of my mind, I have to remind myself that God created me very uniquely, and this city doesn’t need another whosoever. They need me to be me.

—Find J.J . Vasquez on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

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## **The Freedom to Feel**

Singer-songwriter Blanca says her new emphasis is on allowing God to use her pain and vulnerability to minister in the lives of others. And she wants believers to know, through her example, that they have the freedom to feel. They don’t have to subdue their emotions or neatly package them before bringing them to God.

“I don’t want to just have this surface appearance of ‘I’m a Christian singer, I have it all together, and here are the

songs of how I can bring you hope,'" she says. "No, I'm using my story and not allowing the pain I've gone through to be in vain. I'm really laying it all on the table and hoping that my healing is your healing as we go through this life together."

Blanca, who lost both of her parents in the last decade, says the Holy Spirit has shown her the importance of following God into unexpected places and how God strengthens us through the hardest seasons of life. In this interview, she talks about all that, her new Spanish language EP *Quebrantado* and what she's seeing in the next generation of Christians.

*This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here:*

Berglund: Do you mind sharing your testimony?

Blanca: I grew up not necessarily in a Christian home. I think with my culture, Christianity is something that is respected and that everyone knows in the Latin culture, but it's not necessarily something that is lived out or like a real, intimate, emotional thing. My parents divorced when I was six years old. My dad was addicted to drugs and alcohol and just kind of at a bad place in his life. And so he ended up going his own way.

Me, my brother and my mom stayed in Orlando, Florida, where I'm from, and I feel that a lot of insecurity and hardship started to form from that place. I dealt with a lot of things that probably young girls shouldn't have dealt with at that time, from sexual abuse to a lot of anxiety and fear forming at that place.

But the crazy and lovely thing about my testimony is that even when I didn't know what He was doing, God was doing something on my behalf. My dad came back into the picture when I was a

young teenage girl. And little did I know he was the first person I knew who had given his life to Christ. He had found the Lord on his own journey and had a God moment, and came back for his kids and apologized. He just wanted to be a part of our life.

So he was the one who started taking us to church on the weekend. I started going to church with my dad every Sunday or every other Sunday and seeing the huge change that had happened in his life. I ended up giving my life to Christ at 17 years old with my dad there. We went to a play at a local church in Orlando, and God was just pulling on my heart, and I knew it was time for me to let go of control, and so I gave my life to the Lord at that point. And here I am years later, still serving the Lord and being able to—I hope—encourage people and inspire them through my music.

Berglund: When it comes to encouraging people through music, what are some of the things you're most passionate about? What are the messages you really want people to take away?

Blanca: I think where I currently stand within my music, I have this huge passion to really be uncomfortably honest with where I'm at and what God is doing, and not feel like I can't express the emotions that come with life and reality. Sometimes we feel angry. Sometimes we feel really, really sad, and we're dealing with anxiety, and we have to go to counseling. These are all real issues that I feel like a lot of Christians go through but somehow we feel—I think "condemned" is a strong word, but we just feel ashamed of really being honest about these places that we find ourselves in.

So when it comes to identity, to finding hope through suffering, to breaking down the walls of religion and really digging deep to have a strong relationship with Jesus, these are all big things that I want to shine through my music.

Berglund: As I talk to young Christian leaders around the country, that is something that I'm hearing from a lot of people: that desire for greater vulnerability and authenticity in the church. Is that something you've observed as well?

Blanca: I have. You would probably have a better understanding, because you get to talk to all these different people from different places and walks of life. But for me in my life, or even on this tour, being surrounded by these amazing godly women, I think there is a hunger for authenticity and vulnerability and being able to encourage one another through these places, rather than feeling like it might make us a lesser Christian to really be honest about the things that we struggle with. I think it's a beautiful thing.

From my experience, I've learned that when I'm able to open up these places to the Lord or to community and people, that's where true light shines in and healing happens, you know? That's my goal through this new season that I'm in, to really feel the freedom with what God is doing in my life to express myself and be honest through my music.

Berglund: You talked about in Latin culture that a lot of times faith is this big part, but it's often in a nominal way as opposed to being lived out. With the Latino population growing so much in the United States, but also around the world, as churches continue to have more and more people from the Latino community come in, what effect do you think that'll have on church?

Blanca: I might be a little biased, but I think the Latino culture and people are just amazing, beautiful people, and they're hungry and they want more. It's been cool to watch.

I've been exploring avenues to translate my music into Spanish and trying to do things for my roots and my heritage and my culture—to be able to connect with people in their heart language, in their native tongue. There's a lot of believers

within the Latino race who listen to CCM music or they listen to Christian music, but to be able to have that within their actual language is so beautiful. It connects straight to their heart.

I would encourage a lot of churches, radio stations and even magazines out there to continue to do that and have that available, because it's growing so rapidly when you look at the actual numbers or the statistics of how Latin culture is coming into the United States. In our culture, it's huge. It has such a big impact.

But from my experience back in the day, I'm realizing that when I talk to young Latin families or second generation Spanish kids—who maybe didn't grow up in Mexico or Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic, but their parents did, and then they all moved to the States—they have an understanding and even a fear of God. It's something that you're raised with. You pray and you do all these things. But having that deep intimacy and that relationship with God, I feel like it's something that we're all kind of journeying into.

Berglund: You just brought up that you've been recording music in Spanish. Tell me about your new EP, Quebrantado.

Blanca: I released an album called Shattered, which was my latest English release. The album itself is all about this traumatic experience that I've walked through with losing both of my parents. Moreso my mom. My dad passed away in 2011, which was very devastating, but then recently my mom passed away to breast cancer, and it's where a lot of the songs kind of were birthed from.

As I'm listening to now the finished product of Shattered, my heart behind that was to be very vulnerable and very honest, but also, in some strange way, to try to honor the life and the legacy that my parents left behind for me. I remembered, on many occasions, my mom and my dad being like, 'Blanca, you

should really consider releasing music in Spanish for your family. For your roots. There's so many people for whom it would be such a blessing to hear your music in Spanish.'

So I thought, You know what? Now's the time. I want to do this. I want to find this part of me that has been pushed down and hasn't really been explored.

So I went back to Puerto Rico where I'm from. I got to bring my son with me for the first time and just explore the houses my parents grew up in and meet with my family. I hadn't been there since my dad passed away, so it had been quite a few years. And here I am releasing Quebrantado, which is my first Spanish EP. As scary as it is, because it's a new territory for me, there's something so peaceful in it to be like, 'Man, God, this is exactly where you want me in this current stage in my life, and I feel so much peace from it. And I'm able to feel like I'm connected to my parents in some way.' It's been really amazing.

Berglund: How do you see the Holy Spirit moving in the music industry, particularly the CCM industry that you're in?

Blanca: Oh my gosh, it's like an unending list of all the beautiful things that I feel like Holy Spirit is doing within our industry. I'm just a huge fan. And I get to see both sides to it. I get to tour with a lot of these artists and just hear their heart and see the difference they're making with what they have to work with. Outside of the amazing songs that we all get to listen to and love, they're making a huge impact on my life and the lives of so many people.

I think of even Mandisa. I'm on this tour with her, and in every city that we go to, they're making a donation to the Salvation Army in that town and helping them with bedding and pillows and coats for kids. It's such a beautiful thing to see these artists really being the hands and feet of Jesus in these places.

But I feel like from a grand perspective, in the grand scheme of things, in my opinion there's this beautiful shift happening where a lot of people are growing into who they are. I don't want to just have this surface appearance of "I'm a Christian singer, I have it all together, and here's the songs of how I can bring you hope." No, I'm using my story and not allowing the pain I've gone through to be in vain. I'm really laying it all on the table and hoping that my healing is your healing as we go through this life together.

I feel like there's this beautiful shift happening with artists really falling into who they're meant to be, you know? Like Lauren Daigle or Tauren Wells. These are huge artists who are just so "them." Maybe a few years ago people would have told them, "You should change this, or maybe you should do this little different or maybe that wouldn't fit in the CCM 'bubble.'" But I see artists being unique and being themselves, and the Holy Spirit is using that to reach a whole new generation of people who have been longing for it.

Berglund: That's a good point, though, that people are breaking beyond the molds that may have existed in past generations to follow wherever God is leading them in this moment. When I've talked to various leaders or pastors, I've seen people talking about that it's not about denominations as much anymore, or our church versus their church. And you're pointing out that it's moving beyond even genres or specific industries. I think that's really cool.

Blanca: I do too. It gets me excited. Even hearing you articulate it so well, like, yes! It's a beautiful thing.

Berglund: You mentioned earlier the death of both of your parents. I'm sure that that pain is shared by many of our readers who have also gone through really hard things, maybe the loss of loved ones or parents. Do you have any advice for them from what you've gone through?

Blanca: I hear stories all the time of people who have listened to my music. Maybe they haven't gone through the same loss experience, but I think to some extent, we've all experienced loss in some form. Whether it's the loss of a child or the loss of a marriage or the loss of self-worth or a job or direction, it's just this place we sometimes find ourselves in, where it feels like we're stuck in a pit and just trying to work through our emotions and our pain.

But the thing that I am working on currently for myself is what I mentioned earlier, and it's this whole concept of not letting my pain go in vain. I really believe that it's through the sharing of your story and allowing God to move in these dark places in our lives that it creates this purpose for what we've walked and gone through. You can even look at Scripture, where it says, "Count it all joy when we go through suffering and we go through these hardships, because it's what creates perseverance and hope in our lives." That would be one thing.

And another thing, it's like the message of all of this. I feel like it all comes back to this message: Give yourself the freedom to feel. I've been in places where I just go numb, and I don't want to work through my emotions. I don't want to let God down. I don't want to let people around me down and be like, "I think I'm going through it right now," you know? I don't want to look like I am going through it.

But I've been really just encouraging the people that I get to talk to: "It's OK to feel these things. It's OK to be upset. God can handle it. You're not going to scare Him away because you're feeling all these emotions. Allow Him into those places."

When you can embrace the fact that you are at that place, I feel like that's where true healing can come out of.

-Find Blanca on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

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# Follow Me

There are a lot of ways to do succession poorly, Andy Croft says. The church has plenty of bad examples in its history. But Croft is encouraged by both the mentors in his life and how he sees the Holy Spirit stirring in the next generation. Through the power of relationship—with one another and with God—Croft believes the church has a bright future ahead.

Croft is the joint senior pastor at Soul Survivor Watford in Watford, United Kingdom, co-pastoring with Mike Pilavachi, who founded the ministry when Croft was just a child. In an interview with Charisma, Croft shared his own testimony of coming to faith in Christ, his relationship with Pilavachi and what he's learned through years of ministry, mentoring and chasing after the Lord.

*This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here:*

Berglund: Can you share your testimony?

Croft: I grew up in a Christian home, and I went to a little Anglican Church in the northeast of England, and I just drifted away really from Christianity when I became a teenager. It just didn't seem massively relevant to me.

And then when I was about 16 years old, I started getting dragged along to Christian youth events by this very persistent friend of mine who I didn't want to say no to after the 15th time he asked me. So I ended up going along and, you know, just became a Christian—but not in one lightbulb moment.

C.S. Lewis sometimes talks about, when people make that moment of conversion, sometimes it's like interrrailing between different countries in Europe. You're on the train when you cross between France and Germany, and you know exactly when it happens because you see the border. But other times, he says, it's like you're asleep on the train, and you wake up in Germany, and you notice all these trees look a bit more German, and there's a lot more beer and a lot less wine, and you think, "Oh, I must be in Germany!" And for me, it was that.

Gradually, the gospel kind of seeped into me, and the real moment where I began to think I think I've actually become a Christian was when I started to seriously change some of my lifestyle and live for Jesus.

A little while after that, a friend of mine dragged me to a Christian camp where I ended up meeting Mike Pilavachi, who leads Soul Survivor and led it at the time, and he just had a word of knowledge for me in a dinner queue when I was queuing up for a burger. I had no idea who he was, and really, from there, I ended up becoming an intern and traveling around the world with him and doing a year in Watford, and really from there, I never left. And now we lead the church together.

Berglund: Some of our readers may never go to the U.K. and see Soul Survivor Watford in person. Can you describe a little bit for them? What's it like?

Croft: It's a church plant that Mike started 27 years ago. The vision behind it was to reach unchurched young people in Watford, which is a town just north of London. When we started, Matt Redman—who's a well-known worship leader now—was in Mike's youth group. They started with about 10 other people, and they started a cafe for young people, inviting those from the local schools to come. And they started to turn up.

After a little while, they started to turn up on a Sunday as well, and they became Christians. 27 years later, they've grown up and had kids, and we had to start a morning service. So it's a church that meets in a warehouse. We're part of the Anglican Church, but it's not particularly conventional. You wouldn't know that we're Anglican, I think, if you just walked into the building. We're now a church of about 1,200, meeting in four services on a Sunday, with a lot of young people in their 20s and 30s and a lot of young families.

Berglund: In the charismatic movement, a lot of people who came in during the Jesus movement in the '70s and the '80s are now starting to pass the torch to the next generation. I think you and Mike co-leading creates a really interesting picture of that. What's been your experience taking on the responsibility for a ministry that's been around about as long as you have?

Croft: You know what? It's been terrifying. But also, because Mike and I do it together, it's very safe as well at the same time. I think, with succession and things like that, there's always so much potential for it to go wrong, and there are so many bad examples of it.

The way that Mike and I do it is we do it as friends. And we really are friends. He and I are involved in each other's lives to a ridiculous extent. He feeds my children stupid amounts of chocolate, and we chat every single day. We prefer each other, and we submit to each other. And that's one of the reasons why it works very well in terms of the dynamic that we have here in Watford.

But the other thing that's a big part of it is, you know, Paul talks about how his relationship with Timothy is as a son with his father—"He served with me in the faith" and all of that stuff. I think when there's that dynamic, it's about relationship. It's based on friendship. When you care about one another more than you care about the ministry, then that

facilitates all sorts of things. One of the things that particularly for me it's facilitated is it's been incredibly freeing and releasing. The way it works with our church is that if something goes well, what happens is Mike makes sure that if there's a human person who gets the credit, he makes sure that I get the credit. And if something goes badly, he makes sure that he takes the blame.

So yes, I have a lot of responsibility. And it is scary because you just think, How can I do this? This is too big for me. You know, when I started out in leadership, I knew an awful lot about leadership. Ten years down the tracks, I don't know anything about leadership. It's amazing how stupid I've gotten as the years have gone on. So there is that aspect of, "It's scary, but it's also safe." And the reason it's safe is because, although Mike is in the process of encouraging me to step up and do more, we're very much doing it as a team, and he's really intentional about making sure that I'm supported in it.

Berglund: In that mentoring relationship then, what has been one of the most valuable pieces of advice that he's given you?

Croft: There are so many. I think for me, the real lessons have come as we've journeyed together. There's that old saying about, "I hear; I forget. I see; I remember. I do; I understand."

One of the things Mike's often said about the way Jesus encouraged the disciples is, first of all, they watched Him do it. Then they did it with Him. And then He sent them off to do it, and then they reported back and had a debrief together.

With Mike, that's kind of how it's been as well. Like, first of all, I watched him all over the world and just asked him questions about how he did things. Then we began to do it together. So when I started to speak, for example, he would do like a 30- to 35-minute talk, and I would pop up in the middle

and do a little 10-minute cameo. It didn't really matter if it wasn't very good, because he is such a great communicator that he just sandwiched it. And then gradually he would let me give full talks, and then he would give me feedback.

But the big key lessons that I remember over the years are the times when it's gone wrong, and where he's just been so kind but also really clear about what's gone wrong. I remember giving talks where I thought I was being passionate, and he said, "You just sounded cross." I remember giving talks where I had a huge reaction because I felt like it had gone badly, and he said, "Listen, maybe it could have been better here and there. But hey, let's talk about what's really going on, which is that your identity is wrapped up in whether or not you're being successful in this area. Actually, it's not about you, Andy."

For me, with my personality, I'm a perfectionist, a control freak, and I don't like to fail. So being with him as he's encouraged me to step out and trust the Lord in my weakness has probably been the biggest lesson that I'll take away.

What he says to me constantly and what he's modeled to me in his life is that God's power is made perfect in our weakness. We can think from the outside, "What leadership's about is knowing what you're doing and having it all together." It's not that. You know, it's better to know what you're doing than not, but the heart of leadership is about intimacy with the Lord, obedience to His voice and trusting that anything that is of eternal worth is going to come as He works through you.

So I've seen him model that, but also I've journeyed with him, and he's had to remind me of it at all the points where I've forgotten it.

Berglund: Wisdom like that really comes from someone who has decades of experience of ministry and walking alongside the Lord. I think that many people in our generation don't have

those mentors or spiritual fathers and mothers who are able to speak into us. Do you have any advice about readers might go about finding those people in their community?

Croft: I think there's a few things. The first one is, Jesus says, "Follow Me." It's not that longing for parents is not important, because it is important to have spiritual moms and dads or mentors. But I think sometimes what we can do is if we don't have that, we can wait around until we do have it, or we go looking for that in a person.

I think the first thing is to remember that we're called to follow Jesus. Jesus is the one who ultimately disciplines us. And so pursuing Him rather than sitting on the sidelines, waiting for someone to come along and encourage us, is the first step.

I think the second step with it is that there are people out there who I look to, and I receive a lot from simply by reading their books or accessing their teaching. You know, Eugene Peterson is a great example of somebody I'll never meet, but his writings and his lived experience are this whole treasure trove that we get the benefits of. I feel like I'm coming up behind a group of leaders who may be 10 years ahead of me, many of whom have had burnout, have overstretched themselves, have been exhausted and have crashed as a consequence. And I'm able to glean a lot of wisdom from experiences they've had that I think probably will prevent me from going in the same direction. There are people who have gone ahead whom we can learn from.

And then the other thing I would say is do anything you can to pursue friendship. Again, to quote C.S. Lewis, one of the things he would say to young people who asked his advice is do anything you can to move to a part of the country where you can be close to your friends. The strength of what Mike and I have together—a lot of it is rooted in the fact that we are doing the journey as friends, and so we can speak truth to

each other. We can remind each other of things that the Lord said when it's difficult.

And then the last thing I would say is be that person to somebody else. Don't wait until you're 60 before you start looking around for people you can encourage. Everybody is crying out for encouragement. There are people who have the most profound ministry through the Barnabas thing of being an encourager to other people, because they embrace that aspect of what it is to be a follower of Jesus and encourage it in others. And they end up releasing sons and daughters all over the world, because they choose to take that on as a mantle or as a calling.

So just to finish, when Mike became the youth worker at the church—he used to be an accountant, and he got asked to be the youth worker at this church called St. Andrews from which our church was planted. But after the vicar asked him to be the youth pastor, he went on this bench, and he prayed this prayer and he said—this is when he was 29 years old—“Lord, I pray that in the years to come, I'll have the privilege of knowing that there are men and women all over the world serving you. And that I had a little part to play in their lives.” And he's said to me time and again that when he gets older, he doesn't want to spend this old age looking at photos of things that he's done. He'd rather look at people he's encouraged who are doing things now.

I'm not a natural, I would say, in terms of being a natural parent type that people would come and open up to all the time. But I'm learning to be one, because I want to have that as part of my call too.

Berglund: Something that's so interesting about Soul Survivor, about you and Mike both, is the way that you are very intentional about living out the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but doing so in a way where—for lack of a better word—you're trying not to make it weird. I think some people have a

barrier to getting involved in the charismatic or the gifts of the Spirit because they think it seems strange. Can you talk about how you go about approaching that with your church and community?

Croft: You're absolutely right. We are very intentional about that. We try and have this tension of encounter on the one hand and accessibility on the other. Leadership, we've learned, is really sort of walking that tension between the two. I think the temptation sometimes can be to either go to everything being about accessibility—to the point where everything has to be timed to the minute and the priority is kind of seeker-sensitive, really—or to go to the other extreme—where it's all about encounter, and we're just going to pursue. If we're not careful, that can become survival of the spiritual fittest.

What we want to try and do is create a space where our priority is not to be seeker-sensitive, but to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. At the same time, what we believe is when we're sensitive to the Holy Spirit in a way that's accessible for people who don't go to church, then that is the most seeker-sensitive thing you can do, because there's nothing more attractive than God's presence. A great cup of coffee is nice, but you can get a great cup of coffee lots of places. It's what Moses says: "What else have we got apart from the presence of God?" So that in itself is seeker-sensitive. You just have to work at being accessible.

So part of the way that we'll try and lead a ministry time or make space for the Holy Spirit is walking that balance of saying God can be as weird as He wants to be. God can do whatever He wants. But we want to try and dumb down the weird. We don't want to add any weird to it. So what will happen sometimes in our meetings is people will manifest and people will do all sorts of things like that. And that's great. And sometimes people don't manifest. The point isn't the manifestation. The point is, "Is God there?"

But what we'll try and do to make it normal is just explain and explain and explain. We've noticed that sometimes times of ministry can be actually divisive, because it can feel like you've got all the holy people who are meeting God, and then you've got everybody else who's just a spectator and who's just watching.

So what we'll often try and do is invite people to come to the front to respond just because it's practical: we can see where they are and we can pray for them. But then what we often say is that for the person who's leading the meeting, their focus becomes the people who are sitting in the back: "How can I pastor them? How can I make sure they don't feel excluded? How can I explain?"

What we'll do is use humor and crack jokes deliberately to burst any spiritual bubble or spiritual atmosphere. We deliberately don't have music playing in the background as we begin the time of ministry. We're just trying to do everything we can to reduce human hype. We get a lot of that from the early Vineyard. I think it's fascinating that Wimber and the early Vineyard movement really came out of the Quakers, who, in their heyday, would just stand there and wait for the Lord. And that's kind of our model as well. So we'll remove any human element and any hype that we can as we seek to pursue God, but at the same time, we don't want to be afraid of encounters, and we don't want to be afraid of emotion when God turns up.

Berglund: Do you find that it makes it a lot easier for people to engage with the gifts of the Spirit then?

Croft: Yeah. One of the things that we noticed—and I'm sure a lot of places have—is that people are looking for authenticity. They can smell it when it's not real. So we actively pursue authenticity and being real.

Again, what we'll say often is we don't hype the Holy Spirit

up; He comes down. So when God manifests His power, and it's a very obvious manifestation of that, we just explain it in as normal a way as we can. And when it doesn't seem like a great deal happens, again, we don't get worried about it and try and make it happen. We just say, "OK, that's fine. Let's just go and get some ice cream."

So we've noticed that it becomes easier for people who aren't used to church environments to enter in. We've been running festivals for the last 27 years. We have huge numbers of non-Christians turn up, and lots and lots of them end up giving their lives to Jesus. But we make space for ministry from really the first morning. What's wonderful is when it's God, they can sense that, and they're drawn to it. So long as we explain it and make it normal, then, yeah, they're hooked.

Berglund: In your own quiet time, when you're praying and spending time with God, what has He been putting on your heart recently?

Croft: Oh, lots of things. I think the main thing He's been speaking to me about personally has been learning to trust in Him and learning to rest in Him. My temptation is always that if I feel like things need to happen, I become increasingly frantic in trying to make them happen.

One of my favorite passages that I come back to again and again and again is Mark 4, where there's the parable of the farmer who goes out and scatters the seed. It's a very short parable. Basically, Jesus says the farmer scatters the seed and then whether he sleeps or he doesn't, night and day, he's got no idea how the seed grows. Then, when the time comes, he harvests it. There's lots in that, but one of the things that I've been meditating on is the fact that God makes things grow. Just like Paul says in Corinthians, Paul can start something, and Apollos can water it, but ultimately, God's the one who makes it grow. And when I'm at peace in that space, then what happens is I do all the things I was doing anyway,

but I am less frantic in the way I go about them. There's a peace in my soul.

But what I find is often that's a place that I visit; it's not really a place that I live. So once again, God's been trying to speak to me and say, "Hey, Andy, you do your bit, and I'll do My bit, and let's be a team. And why don't you stop trying to do My bit?" So I'm on a journey with that.

Berglund: Is there anything that you feel like we should talk about that we didn't get to bring up?

Croft: I think the only thing I would add is something that I've been pondering quite a lot recently, which is the importance of intimacy in ministering in the Spirit. One of the things that we've noticed again and again and again is that so often our times of ministry where the Spirit moves flow out of intimacy in worship.

Because we're growing as a church, we're having to multiply our services and things like that. We went through a phase recently of thinking, "Do we need to start timing our worship? Do we need to start putting everything down on a rotor? Because we need to make space for people." And in the end, we concluded, "We do need to make space for people but not at the expense of that, because if we lose that, we've lost everything." For us, we've just been reminded again that intimacy in worship is not a means to an end. It's an end in itself to glorify God. But so often when we pursue Him and our hearts become open to Him, it's like he's able to move.

So often with pastoring this, the problem is not that God doesn't want to move. He always wants to meet His people. The problem is we're not always ready to meet Him. And in focusing on Him, there's just a freedom in that.

Berglund: You said we're not always ready to meet Him. Why do you think that is?

Croft: Ah, man. One hundred and one reasons. Because I pastor a church, I turn up on a Sunday very early and I'm sort of praying and stressing about what I'm going to speak on, but I'm in the zone, and I can forget the fact that for most people, if they turn up on a Sunday morning, it's all they can do not to put the kids in the oven and the chicken in the car, you know? Their lives are busy; their lives are hectic; their lives are exhausting. They've got all the pressures that they're under.

If you imagine having a romantic meal with someone, it's very hard walking in from an unbelievably, brutally hectic week to suddenly switching into being there and being present with that person and being open to them and listening to what they want to say, as well as sharing where you're at. That dynamic in a relationship takes time to form. And this is relational. You know, at the end of the day, Christianity is about relationship with God, and so it's appreciating some of those barriers.

Then the other ones are things that we don't even realize about ourselves: We've got baggage; we've got walls that we've built up very carefully, armor that we've put on because we've been hurt. It takes time for some of that to come off. It's learning how to do that and go on a journey over time.

But also, I think that's one of the reasons why there are benefits to going to a conference or doing something that's three or four days in a row. We've noticed that when we do Naturally Supernatural, which is a six-day conference we run in the summer, it's like there's a softening that takes place. The journey from Night One to Night Six is incredible. But it's a bit like, if the ground is hard, and the rain falls on it, then initially the rain just runs off. Because the ground has got this crust that's formed. But ever so slowly, what happens is the crust begins to soften; it absorbs the water, and it's able to drink it in. I think people are a bit like that. And that's where there's the pastoral dynamic to it, as

well as the prophetic. You've got to pastor people into it.

—Find Andy Croft on Twitter.

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## Permission Granted

Young people across the country are coming into radical relationships with Jesus Christ. As a member of the Circuit Riders ministry, Yasmin Pierce sees these transformations happen regularly as part of her job.

Pierce spoke to Charisma about how the Holy Spirit is moving on college campuses, particularly among young women, and why God's desires need to become our desires.

*This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here.*

Berglund: Would you mind sharing your testimony?

Pierce: I come from a family of two different kinds of religious backgrounds. My mother is Lutheran from Germany, and my father is African American, from the South, and grew up Baptist. We were a church-attending family, so I grew up going to both churches. We were really more nominally Christian and went for the sake of having that Sunday time with God, but that didn't really carry through for the rest of our week. But I do remember being confirmed in the Lutheran Church and just having this fascination with the Bible. The concept that we could have a relationship with God was always very interesting to me. But that's kind of where it ended.

And then I just had the vacation Bible camp moment, where for the first time you're away from your family, and you're really presented with the question of "What will be my decision for my life?" for the first time in middle school. And really, that's where I would say I really encountered God for myself and encountered Jesus and a fuller understanding of the gospel.

That was really a life-changing time for me—a life-marking time—and I distinctly remember thinking two primary thoughts at that time. One was, if God is real, I couldn't imagine having a life that doesn't respond to Him. The concept of living knowing that God is real but not having a response to Him as a lifestyle just seemed totally crazy to me. So that was one: that if He's real, I have to follow Him. The second was just a thought of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. The reality of going from death to life by following Jesus was so profound to me and obviously such a stark difference of what your life could end up looking like. I just remember the simple thought of, If my whole life effort could just come together for even one person to make that decision to follow Jesus, all of that effort would be worth it.

For me, that simple summer camp really set the course for my life. In our generation, we can be cynical sometimes about events and gatherings. It doesn't all happen at one moment, but I just believe and we see it scripturally that God can do so much in one gathering. For me, that set the course of my life.

In high school, I started going to a church where we'd see on a regular basis people coming to faith in Jesus. And really, that was the primary ambition and life goal for me. I wanted to see people come to faith in Jesus. So I ended up going to college, studied politics really with that heart of "How can the church go into areas of state failure, of countries suffering economically, and see the church make a difference and really bring the gospel to that place?"

But the real final turning point for me, even in that environment, was that I remember being a freshman on campus, and I went to school at Columbia University in New York City. So it was a big environment change for me. I grew up in Virginia, where everyone's at least been exposed to the gospel, and now I was in New York City, where you talk to some people and the most they know about Jesus sometimes is just Christmas and Santa Claus. Being in that environment as a freshman, my eyes opened to the reality that 90 to 99% of this campus doesn't know Jesus or have a relationship with Jesus.

In that place, the need that's on college campuses really struck me—that these institutions are where our world leaders come from, and I had a peek into the spiritual health of them for the first time. That is where the further direction of my life really took off.

Berglund: Tell me a little bit more than about your work through Circuit Riders then.

Pierce: Circuit Riders is a branch of Youth with a Mission (YWAM). YWAM exists to send young people and to empower them as missionaries all throughout the world. Usually when you join YWAM, as an American, you're thinking of going to another country or continent: to India, to Africa, to South America. But at Circuit Riders, our heart is to say, "The cities of America and the university campuses of America need the gospel just as much as other nations do."

So for us, we train young missionaries, leaders, communicators and worship leaders to go to university campuses, establish relationships there and really see the gospel go forward. For myself and my husband, we work on a team that works on a project called Carry the Love. Carry the Love is a campaign to inspire a generation to love like Jesus. A few years ago, our team looked at the state of campuses and saw that, on most college campuses, there's really only about 5% of the student body that's engaged in any intentional worship environment or

Bible study—any Christian community on campus. We've talked to other campus ministry organizations, and this is the trend across campuses—usually 95% of the student body is not engaged in any sort of Christian community. Of course, as missionaries, we would look at that and say, "That's not OK. How can we serve to make a difference?"

What we do with Carry the Love is we go from campus to campus establishing relationships. It's really a grassroots, friendship-based initiative. We first bring together believers in one place, because we realize to reach that 95% that doesn't know Jesus, it starts with the believers on campus, and it starts with the culture among the believers. So we come together. We do worship nights with believers and invite even those who are maybe seeking God and curious: "Is Jesus real? What does He have to do with my life?" We invite them to these worship nights.

Those are really times for believers on campus to make a personal life decision and a cultural decision between their groups to say, "Hey, we're not going to exist here on campus just to get by and check the box and say, 'OK, we're believers.' We're really on a mission on our campus, and God's put us in the midst of a harvest. And we really have influence to see Jesus known." The heart of those nights is really to make a decision to say, "We will carry the love of Jesus to the rest of the harvest here. We will carry the love of Jesus outside of these four walls."

When we do those gatherings together, we see many Christians honestly revived in their faith and revived even in their personal understanding of the gospel and understanding of the cross. Many times we see nonbelievers come to faith actually in those gatherings. A lot of times they end up in spontaneous nights of baptisms, extended times of worship and prayer, and it's really a powerful kind of encounter.

But we don't actually end there. We usually have a second day

on that campus where we say, "Okay, now let's make what we just talked about real, and let's actually have a time in the afternoon where we go out and share the gospel." And on campus after campus, we see students for the first time ever communicating the gospel on campus to other students—many times seeing them actually making a saving decision to follow Jesus.

We also have men's breakout times, and we have women's breakout times called Brave Love. We really just help to serve with the students and catalyze further gospel movement on their campuses. So, of course, we've seen so many testimonies of what God's done over the years. From about January to May 2019, we went to about 300 different universities in America, a few of those being actually in Europe, in the U.K., as well. We saw about 40,000 young people gather. (That is for both university campuses and high schools.) And we saw about 2,000 make decisions to follow Jesus.

Of course, in that, there are so many personal testimonies of what the Lord's done. But one of my favorite stories—just for a snapshot of what it looks like—is at a school in Michigan called Western Michigan University. Anyone who's from that area in Michigan knows it's actually called lovingly by people in the area, "Waste-ern," because it has a reputation that people go just for the party culture, to drink and so forth. So the Christians there said, "Man, we really want to do one of these Carry the Love two-day experiences. We want to see the gospel known more on campus."

So they partnered with us. We put together a worship night. And to our surprise, we opened the doors for that night, and hundreds of students flooded in, mostly from the fraternities, sororities and athletic clubs. We were amazed at the turnout. We preached the simple gospel, gave an invitation and said, "Hey, if you're hearing this gospel, and you're deciding tonight, 'I want to make Jesus Lord and Savior of my life. I want to surrender my life to Him,' we just encourage you in

front of everyone to just stand up right now.” And all across the room students stood up crying, moved by the love of God. And one of those students was a little gymnast freshman girl. (For the sake of this, I’ll give a different name. Let’s say her name is Sarah.) She stood up crying, and her friend who brought her gave her a big hug. She was just so moved that Sarah made this decision to follow Jesus. We wrapped up the night, and we had the second day.

Weeks later, we’re hearing testimonies from the students there, and we hear that Sarah, the first-year student who just came to faith in Jesus, just four days later is sharing the gospel on her campus. And in her dorm, she’s leading her friends to faith in Jesus four days after herself giving her life to Jesus. Then after that, she mobilizes a team that comes for leadership training, to say, “How can we keep doing events like this on our campus? How can we keep stepping out as leaders?” So the whole team comes over the summer to get trained at a leadership camp that we do. So they come and then they start making plans: “We want to get a gym, and we want to fill it with even hundreds more students than last time. We want to do another worship night.”

So our team visits in the fall to meet up with some student leaders and pray about that. And Sarah’s there. We get into her room just to meet with a few students, and Sarah has gathered 40 different leaders on campus—student leaders—in the room. We’re shocked. She’s a sophomore at this point.

And she gets up in front of that room full of student leaders and she says to them, “You know what, guys? It took eight months while I was a freshman on campus before I heard the gospel. Eight months of partying, eight months of trying to figure out what my identity was, giving myself away to other people, before I heard about the love of Jesus,” and she looks at everyone and she says, “I would do anything this year to make sure it doesn’t take eight months for the next freshman class to hear the gospel.”

We watch as with so much love and so much passion she calls awake this room of leaders to say, "We have to activate. We can't just say we're Christians on campus and leave it at that. God's given us a real call on this campus." So they come together and, working as a team and collaborating between their different groups, they get that gymnasium, they fill it with hundreds of students and, again, see so many come to faith in Jesus.

For us, that's a snapshot of just one story of literally hundreds and thousands of examples over these years, of seeing students who are even in different organizations or clubs, who do things differently in those organizations, but say, "We agree in who Jesus is. We agree in His saving power, and we might have to just put differences aside to say let's work together to reach the harvest on our campus."

My husband and I have been working together with this team for these Carry the Love gatherings for the past few years. We work on that nationally with a team, and more specifically, we work in the Northeast region—so New York City, Boston, the Philadelphia area and a bit of the Midwest as well. That's a bit of what we do.

Sarah's example here is just testimony that God's really doing something unique in the lives of women. And out of this, we've really launched and seen God launch a movement that we're calling Brave Love. Sarah's story is such a great example of this, of young women realizing, "God's given me a love and a burden for people around me, and I don't have to sit back and wait for someone else to rise up and respond to that burden. I can step forward, even if I might feel like the most unlikely person." In that as well, we work on gathering women on campuses and seeing them activated as leaders.

Berglund: Many on campus are often reluctant to talk about their faith or to share it, even when it is genuine for them. It sounds like you've had a lot of success in motivating these

believers into becoming vocal about their faith. In your experience, what do you think holds many people back from talking about it, and what have you found effective in encouraging them into evangelism?

Pierce: That's a great question. I love that. I think naturally, any believer in America at this time would agree that the times—especially on a college campus—are intimidating. It makes sense that you might be a little wary of “How are my friends going to see me if I'm vocal about who Jesus is? What's my reputation going to be on campus?” Faith is not a widely embraced topic or identity, really, for our generation. That's really clear.

Honestly, I think on campuses a lot of students are just facing that real intimidation of “How am I going to be seen? What's my reputation going to be?” We see that in the college groups and in the Christian groups on colleges. There's a little bit of that almost fear: “What would happen if I'm extremely vocal about this?”

If you look just scripturally, God uses us when we respond even at the times when we're most intimidated. So for us, take that Brave Love movement with women we're talking about. One of our main examples, of course, would be the life of Deborah. Deborah is looking at 20 years of Israel being oppressed by a foreign nation. The Bible says no one rose up—even the greatest army generals and greatest soldiers of Israel—for 20 years. They were so afraid, so intimidated by this oppressive army, that no one rose up. But Deborah, out of a place of encountering God—and clearly, as you look at her story, out of a place of love for her nation—and getting a word from God, rises up out of that place and says, “We've got to do something. Barak, you've got to go. You've got to rally your troops.” He says, “Hey, if you don't go, I'm not going.” She goes with him, and they see a great victory.

So when we're looking at evangelism on campuses, I think it's

really similar. It's really calling students into a place of "Hey, the intimidation is real. You don't have to ignore it. You don't have to act like it's not there. But our God is so real in the midst. And the power of Jesus's love and His zeal for the people on your campus is so real. And if you partner with God, and you come to that place of encountering Him and getting His heart for your campus, that love is going to be honestly just uncontainable."

We love to point students to go to God over their campus and ask God to encounter their hearts. I mean, we all know in 1 Corinthians 13, it says, "Love never fails." And really, that's why we call the name of this whole university campaign Carry the Love. When we go to that place where we encounter the love of God, and it gets to be a place where it's more powerful than any intimidation. It can't stop a student from sharing, "This is who Jesus is. This is what He's done in my life. And I believe it's possible for you too." Honestly, that's what we see. We see students breaking away from that fear, even willing to say yes to the cost of their reputation taking a hit: "People might label me as 'the Christian on campus' or whatever it would be, but I'm willing to pay that cost. Because my love for this campus and Jesus' love for this campus are so great that I'm willing to say yes."

Once they step out of that fear, God meets them, and they see a breakthrough. It might be in one student's life. It might be in hosting a gathering that they may have thought was impossible. You see stories of breakthrough after breakthrough.

Berglund: Another thing you mentioned was how women are rising up on campuses. Earlier this year [2019] at The Send, that was one of the things you talked about there as well. You said young women were really stepping out for their faith. Can you speak a little bit more to that and how you're seeing that at work?

Pierce: I think for a lot of the young women on college campuses, it's simply a question a lot of times of permission: "Do I have permission to step out? Do I have permission to use my voice?" And so for us, our job is really easy. It's really bringing together women, looking at examples in the Bible like Deborah, and saying, "Hey, the Lord's given you permission. You don't have to wait for someone to give you direct steps on what to do. If your heart is broken for your campus, if your heart is broken for your city, look at these scriptural examples where God used women to see a breakthrough, where God used women to see a deliverance. And go for it and step out."

The message and the call are very simple in that way. And it's always astounding to me and our team how needed that message of empowerment is for women on campuses. And of course for men too, 100%, but we're really seeing something take off where on campus after campus, we'll get texts a few days after gathering the women of someone saying, "Wow, I was so inspired just by that simple message of permission, where I am now starting a club on my campus to help the homeless in my city." That's an example from a school in Michigan. Or on another campus where students are coming together on a regular basis now for prayer and intercession on their campus.

So yeah, I think a lot of women may be under the misconception that they can have a heart for things but they can't be the one to step out and see it happen—the one to actually activate what God's doing on their hearts. So we're really amazed by the response, and it's honestly even taken off now to other countries. New Zealand is gathering on a regular basis together. They've actually just had a radio program where I believe it was Miss New Zealand who shared about the same Brave Love message, and inspiring women that from a Christian perspective they're called out to be empowered as leaders.

I mean, we see in the Gospels when Jesus first resurrected from the grave, the first ones to actually declare His resurrection were women. There's such empowerment in the

voices of women.

So we're seeing this take off. My husband and I were just in Nairobi gathering with university students there. We had a break-off session where we just got the women together. Some of those women were from as far as Liberia and Rwanda who gathered, and again, the message still stood just as empowering as in America. A few weeks later, we got a text from these students in Nairobi saying, "Hey, we just gathered 120 women and are teaching this same brave love message and talking about the story of Deborah." So we're really amazed at the viral impact that this simple empowerment is having.

Berglund: We're at an interesting point in the charismatic movement right now, where a lot of longtime ministries are moving into new hands. Coming from your perspective, as one of those young leaders who is directly working with so many other young people, how are you noticing the Holy Spirit at work in the next generation?

Pierce: I love that you're even referencing the Jesus People movement of the '70s, because, really, in the past few years for our team with Circuit Riders, we've been largely inspired by that movement and the broad impact that happened. In many ways we're praying that we would see a new Jesus People movement in this day and in this generation.

Of course, this is a great topic to talk about, so I'll try to keep it concise. But very simply, for me and for our team, I believe what we're seeing is students awakening to the reality that God might be using them as the answer to their own prayers.

For many of our upbringings, we're taught or might understand the kingdom and the church to work in a way where the real work of the kingdom is done by the pastors and by the missionaries. But I think young people are now saying, "Wow, I can't relegate the work of the gospel just to the people in

the pulpit. I am a missionary wherever God sends me. I am someone who's carrying the Good News, who's carrying the love of Jesus. Whether I'm called to be a banker, a businessman, a lawyer or whatever it may be—and that includes however many years I'm here on a college campus.”

So really, I think what we're seeing is this permission hitting a generation of young people realizing, “I might not have a seminary degree. I might not even be appointed in an official position in a church. But I'm a surrendered believer of Jesus Christ, filled with His love, filled with His Spirit, and He's placed me in an environment of need. And that's all that's necessary for me to see Jesus move.”

I think we're seeing this real grassroots movement of that shift in responsibility and shift in permission, where we're seeing young people say they don't have to wait for several years of training to be able to share the gospel with a roommate who's in need. So it's really just simply breaking that mentality that you need to go through different hoops of qualification before you're ready to share about the love of Jesus.

I mean, really, that's the heart of the original Circuit Riders movement with John Wesley and Francis Asbury. They're known to be ones who really flipped that system on its head and empowered everyday believers to be preachers of the gospel. You didn't have to be in a pulpit. You didn't have to be in a physical church wearing a wig in order to tell people about Jesus. I think we're seeing a modern-day revolution of that as well.

Berglund: The flip side of that question is, if we think about a lot of those older believers—many of whom read Charisma—what advice would you give them about how to help and lead that next generation?

Pierce: One hundred percent our heart—my heart and all of

Circuit Riders'—is this is completely an intergenerational kingdom work and kingdom movement right now. I know our team would not be where we are if it weren't for the support, the teaching, the impartation and the leadership of older generations. Some of our most pillar culture pieces come from those who have paved the way and gone before us and who are still walking with us and counseling us. Some of those include Loren and Darlene Cunningham, the founders of YWAM; Joy Dawson, a major intercessory prayer leader; and others—the list goes on.

What I would say is we're humbled—by the years of sacrifice and the years of saying yes to leadership and yes to the cost—that have paved the way for us to even be here. But even in this time, we can't go on without the other generations. We need them in every way. So I mean, obviously one of those is just simply making a space of empowerment for us. But beyond that, we want to learn. We need to understand the Bible in greater ways. We want to learn greater depth from the Scripture. We want to learn what you've learned in that secret place with Jesus. And we want to do this together as a family.

Berglund: In your own quiet time, what has God been laying on your heart recently? What has He got you passionate about?

Pierce: Recently, in our Circuit Riders community, we're all doing a reading of the Old Testament together. We've been in First Samuel, and I've just been so interested in the storyline of David becoming king, particularly in light of Israel demanding a king with Saul and all of that—looking at the heart of a people towards God and towards God's leadership. It's so interesting to me that Israel demanded a king, but God's desire was to lead them. And then God answers their prayer and provides Saul, and even the story of Saul becoming king is really supernatural when you consider everything God did to bring him to that place.

But even there we see Saul still working in presumption. I

know I'm getting specific here. But when the Philistines are coming forward, and he's supposed to wait for Samuel to do a sacrifice, but he moves in presumption and does the sacrifice, and Samuel confronts him and says, "You've done a foolish thing." And he speaks to Israel and says, "You're going to see how evil your request was to demand a king." And he says these words that have just struck me recently, where Samuel says that God is going to appoint a king and bring forward a king who is after God's own heart. And I just think that's such a beautiful story.

Of course, David's life is so beautiful. Obviously, he makes major mistakes, but he is a man who pursues God and wants to honor God and seek God's highest over everything else. I just think that whole part of Scripture is very provoking as a young believer, as a young leader, to say, "Yes, we can have our prayers. We can have our requests of the Lord. But really, the highest is to inquire of God, 'What is Your heart? What is Your desire?'" And I want to partner with that. I want to pursue that desire over everything. To just constantly be in that place where we're never presuming what the next steps are, but we're constantly surrendering to what God's already leading in.

Berglund: Is there anything that you wanted to talk about or bring up that we didn't get to during the course of the interview?

Pierce: Our whole team at Circuit Riders, we know that when it's the darkest, we have the opportunity for the light to shine the brightest; we're filled with hope. But we're also just amazed at God's ability to bring breakthrough and God's saving power in our generation that goes way beyond our wildest dreams. We're seeing so many students come to faith in the Lord.

The Send—we're amazed at the favor that God's pouring out for young people to gather around the sound of going into the

harvest. To connect it back to that storyline of David, of just saying, “When we lay down our own concept of what we think it looks like and press in for what God has, even in unconventional ways, when He’s asking us to do things in ways that don’t make sense ...” It’s just so humbling to see when God fulfills His own desires, and that it way surpasses anything that we could have ever dreamed of and, of course, anything that we could have made happen. So I think we’re in awe of God and what He’s doing in this generation.

–Find Yasmin Pierce on her website and Instagram.

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## **Word, Spirit and Sacrament**

For a long time, the American church has been split between the Word and the Spirit movements, but convergence is taking place. The two are reuniting and becoming one—and Pastor Glenn Packiam believes a third stream, “sacrament,” ought to be included in that convergence as well.

Packiam is an associate senior pastor at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and the author of the new book *Blessed, Broken, Given*. In his conversation with Charisma, Packiam makes the case for the Communion table as a place to not only remember Christ’s sacrifice, but to reaffirm our covenant with God and to encounter Him in a method unfiltered by any other human.

*This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here:*

Berglund: A lot of our readers may not be familiar with you.

Can you start by sharing your testimony?

Packiam: Sure. I've been at New Life Church for 19 years. But let's go back a little further than that.

I'm from Malaysia. I grew up there. My mom was born in Singapore, my dad in Malaysia. My mom comes from a Christian family, and my dad actually came from a Hindu family. They met at the University of Singapore as college students and, as things got serious, my mom basically said, "Look, I'm not marrying a Hindu." And my dad was compelled to convert. They were kind of nominal Christians at the time.

Then through a family member—my aunt—persisting and sharing the gospel with them, both of them experienced a born-again conversion where they made faith personal and put complete and total trust in Jesus. That began to revolutionize their marriage. My sister and I came along around that same time period.

Part of the story here is a friend invited them to attend a Bible study with a Baptist pastor. So they were attending this Anglican church on Sundays. They were attending this Bible study with a Baptist pastor midweek. And then on separate occasions, both of them were introduced to the charismatic renewal. I think my dad actually encountered it through a Full Gospel Business Men's meeting that took place in a hotel he was staying at on one of his business trips. We would say it's random, but really, we know it's providential. The Lord interrupted both of their paths.

They were very deeply moved by the charismatic renewal that was at the time sweeping over Southeast Asia and around the world. So they eventually switched to a different church, a Pentecostal charismatic church, and that's the church I remember for a lot of my childhood. Then when I was 10, our family moved from Malaysia to America. So that was a huge move. Basically, my parents felt like the Lord was calling

them into vocational ministry and to step away from their careers. My dad had a great career going in the advertising industry. And my mom was teaching part-time English classes and English as a second language stuff. Both of them felt this radical call toward vocational ministry, and there were some friends they knew who had gone to a Bible college in Portland, Oregon. So our family moved to Portland. We lived there for three years.

We were part of a great church there. At the time, it was called Bible Temple. It's gone through a couple of name changes now—City Bible Church, and I think now it's called Manna Church. But we lived there for three years. My parents were plugged in at the Bible college. My sister and I went to the Christian school there. And then we moved back to Malaysia, and I finished up my high school years with an extension/homeschool version of this Christian school in Portland.

I knew I was going to come back to the States to go to college. At 17, I came back and ended up going to Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I met some great friends there and had some great professors. I was a theology major. I led worship there for chapels. In fact, I stayed on for a year after graduation and worked on staff to lead worship for the chapel services. Then that led to my coming to New Life here in Colorado Springs. There was a bit of a pipeline at the time between ORU and New Life, and I'm very grateful for that. So I moved out here in the summer of 2000.

Berglund: Tell me more about New Life Church. What's it like?

Packiam: Well, New Life is a great church. It's a nondenominational charismatic church. In the '90s, it was very involved in the Prayer Through The Window stuff. It's got a long legacy of missions and prayer and worship and students. That's been part of the heritage here for a lot of years.

It began in 1985. And, of course, in late 2006, there was a pretty public scandal with the founding senior pastor, Ted Haggard, that made headlines sadly around the world. It was a difficult time for the church. But it really drove not only the staff and pastors, but also the congregants, to our knees, and we began to do the thing that we needed to do, which was to pray and to worship, to seek the Lord and to keep gathering in community with one another. I remember being in other people's homes and having people in our home and praying together, having meals together, and just carrying each other through that time.

Then our new senior pastor came in August 2007, Brady Boyd, and he's been a real godsend—a tremendous gift. But sadly, 100 days into his time, there was a shooting that happened on our church campus. And tragically, two teenage girls lost their lives. A couple others were injured. And so again, it felt like, “Man, how much can a church endure, from scandal to tragedy, in a 13-month span?” But once again, the grace of God was with us and began to rally us together as a church. We gathered a few nights after that Sunday and worshipped together and sang together. We sang one of the songs that came from our church, a song called “Overcome,” written by John Egan, a dear friend of mine. It caused us really to lean deeper into Jesus and to strengthen our relationships with one another, and a whole bunch of stuff has changed over the last 12 years in really good ways. We can talk about some of that if you want, but it changed the way we think about local church, the way we think about pastoral ministry, the way we think about our corporate worship gatherings and ways that we've learned to lean into Jesus in a more holistic way.

Berglund: There's the charismatic wave that happened around the time of the Jesus Movement and that your parents participated in as well. Now it seems like there's another wave of interest in the charismatic, the gifts of the Spirit among the next generation. So I'm curious for New Life then,

as a nondenominational charismatic church, what changes are you guys adopting and how are you part of that shift between the movements?

Packiam: Well, I would say it's an addition, not an exchange or subtraction or anything like that. It's an expansion.

One of the greatest gifts of the charismatic movement to the body of Christ is this conviction that God is at work, even when we can't see it or can't feel it. God is at work in the midst of the ordinary moments and the ordinary things. And actually, what we've stumbled into over the last decade or so, is there's another stream of the body of Christ that tends to say similar things. That's this thread of sacramental theology.

The idea of sacramental theology is that ordinary things like bread and wine actually become the occasion for an encounter with the presence of God. Without getting into weird things about "Is this actually the body and blood of Jesus?"—we're not saying that. But we're saying there's something mysterious that happens even in the midst of an ordinary moment, like coming to the Lord's Table.

So what we've learned is, actually, when you take some of this charismatic encounter with the Holy Spirit, and look at other ways that that encounter with the presence of God shows up, the central practice that comes into view is the coming to the Lord's table. Christians from the very beginning said, "Look, something happens when we gather at the table, and remember the death of Jesus Christ. It's as if Jesus is present with us again." Actually, one of the reformers, John Calvin, explained it through a theology of the Holy Spirit by saying, "When the worshipper comes with faith in their hearts, then the Holy Spirit administers the presence of Jesus to us."

So for us as a church, we began about 10 years ago to practice weekly Communion, not just out of ritual or "Hey, we should do

this. This is something Christians have done; therefore, we should too," but rather as a way of saying, "This is a practice of the church that unmistakably focuses our attention on Jesus."

And I'll tell you: Coming as we did out of a situation where there was a major fall of the leader—and of course we seem to hear these kinds of stories all too often—it's very easy to just replace the personality with a different personality and replace one name with another name, instead of saying, "Wait a minute. Regarding the practices we're doing together when we worship, in what way are those things actually undermining the message we want to communicate?"

In other words, we want people to know that it's all about Jesus, but do the size of our room and the shape of our services communicate the same thing? Or do our services and auditoriums communicate that, actually, it's also about this worship band, or it's also about this preacher or this pastor?

Look, when the worship team's on the stage—and I spent my first 10 years or so at New Life as one of the worship leaders and songwriters—the worship team can do a great job or do a poor job, and that affects our experience of the presence of God. The preacher can do a good job or a poor job, and that affects our ability to receive from the word of the Lord. But when we come to the table, it's almost like all of us become like John the Baptist. We move out of the way, and we say, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

So we learned to incorporate and adopt practices that would actually more obviously anchor us not only to the historic practices of the church, but also center us on Jesus Himself.

Berglund: That's really fascinating. I don't know that I've ever heard anyone articulate it quite like that before.

Packiam: It's an interesting thing, because we tend to not pay

enough attention to our worship practices. I can say this because, again, as a worship leader, I spent many years thinking, "We've got to adapt to the times and just try what works and be pragmatic about it." But actually, our worship practices don't just express our heart to God or reach people; they also form us. I was able to test some of this when I was doing my doctoral work over the last couple years.

I've recognized that there's really three dominant paradigms for thinking about our congregational worship. One paradigm says, "It's all about mission. Reach the lost at any cost." This is kind of the legacy in American history: from the frontier revivals, from the Second Great Awakening onward. Use whatever method necessary, because the gathering is all about our mission: reaching the lost world. That's true.

But then there's another paradigm that says, "What this is all about is encounter. When two or three gather, there's Jesus, and so whatever helps us encounter His presence, that's what we need." I think that is one of the gifts of the charismatic stream. (The first one would have been a gift of the general evangelical stream.)

But then there's this third paradigm that says, "Actually, our corporate worship is all about formation. When we say words together, when we pray together, it forms our faith." There's an old saying of the church from centuries ago that says, "The way we pray becomes the way that we believe." That means the things that you repeatedly say before God. This is why when Jesus' disciples said "Teach us how to pray," Jesus gives them a prayer, rather than saying, "Well, just do whatever comes into your mind." He says, "Here's some words that will actually shape your view of God and your picture of God."

What we've come to the conviction of at New Life is that actually all three of those paradigms are important: mission, encounter and formation. And there is a way for a church to hold together all three of those things. We do want to think

about the lost. We do want to encounter the living presence of Christ. And we want to think about how these practices are shaping and forming us. So how have we changed as a church? We've learned to expand our focus from being just picking one of those three things to trying to hold all three of those things in tension.

Berglund: I've heard that language of formation in the sermons of John Mark Comer, who's out in Portland at Bridgetown Church.

Packiam: He's a good friend.

Berglund: Oh, fantastic. He's talked about the need for spiritual formation and how what we do affects us. Through Bridgetown and a bunch of other churches stepping onto the national stage, I'm seeing this emphasis on the Word and the Spirit. Whereas maybe before there was more division. For instance, the Baptist churches might be predominantly focused on the Word movement, while the charismatic churches will focus on the Holy Spirit and the gifts. But increasingly, I think there's a number of these nondenominational charismatic churches that say, "We need to have both together." I can tell just listening to you that you are on that same wavelength as well, right?

Packiam: One hundred percent. And I think we might even say "Word, Spirit and sacrament," you know. Because the sacrament part gives you a historical tether. It keeps you connected to the historic church and actually also to the global church.

Sometimes, when I'm talking to charismatics, I'll use this old renewal metaphor where we talked about the river and then the banks of the river. In a way, if the river represents the flow of the Spirit, the banks of the river on either side that keep us in bounds, if you will, are the Word on one side and the table or the sacrament on the other side. Again, the reason for that is because the table is one of those places where the

level of human involvement is very minimal. So we're able to say, "Actually, none of us are really the star of the show. We're all guests at Jesus' banquet. We're actually more than guests; we're sons and daughters at this great table that is set before us. And it's His party." So it keeps us centered and grounded that way.

And I absolutely agree. I think in previous decades, and even previous years, we used to have to feel this need to pick or choose: "Well, which one are you? Are you all about this or are you all about that?" Some of it was kind of reactive. Maybe in my generation, maybe in this day, what the Spirit is doing is saying, "OK, you've now seen all these gifts. I want to weave them together. I want you to hold them together. I want each local church to benefit from the richness of the great body of Christ."

Berglund: In your own personal quiet time, what has God been laying on your heart recently?

Packiam: Man, there's so much to say there. I think one of the things I'm really passionate about is to recognize the church as this kingdom community. What I mean by that is that this isn't just a group of people getting together to pass the time until we all go to heaven someday. You know, sometimes church has been associated with this otherworldly hope—an afterlife kind of hope. But actually, when you read the New Testament, there's a very real sense that an alternative kingdom is arriving. And this community is the first group of people to live under that King, as much as possible, here and now.

That has all kinds of implications.

One, it has implications for our work in the world. Our work in the world is not, to put it bluntly, just about getting souls saved. It's about helping to announce the good news of Jesus's kingship. In Luke 4, Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor." We don't

believe at our church that helping the poor and preaching the gospel are two separate things. We think they overlap and bleed on each other. It all falls under the banner of kingdom work.

If the church is a kingdom community, then kingdom work is caring for the poor and needy, as much as it is announcing the forgiveness of sins. That the Good News is the Good News, not just of a Savior who died but of a King who reigns. The good news is of a King who ushers in an alternative society and alternative kingdom.

So when I say church needs to be a kingdom community, it's got to broaden our picture of what the gospel is. It's got to broaden our picture of Jesus not simply as the Lord of the afterlife but as a King of here and now.

I think it also has implications for churches not being too aligned with one political party. I mean, I'm in Colorado Springs. Lord knows we've seen our fair share of culture wars over the years. When I first got here 19 years ago, there was a lot of that. I'm so grateful for the way Pastor Brady has led our church, not to passive disengagement but rather a kind of prophetic engagement, where we can say, "Actually, there are critiques to be said across the aisle, and our job is not to advocate one partisan line, but to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak, whether that be the unborn or people who are the victims of racism and injustice." So the church as a kingdom community has to cut across political lines.

And then, of course, the third implication may be that the church as a kingdom community needs to be a group of people who are composed of such differences that an outsider would say, "What do all these people have in common?" And the only answer they can give is "Jesus."

Not, "We all go to the same school district" or "We all you shop at the same mall" or whatever, but rather, it's Jesus.

It's one Lord, one faith, one baptism—just as Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Berglund: You've talked about sacrament a few times and how important that is for the church. I think in many Protestant denominations, that term can sometimes feel a little scary and foreign to people. I've certainly heard people say, "Isn't that superstitious?" or "Isn't that what's wrong with Catholicism?" Can you speak a little bit to what the sacraments were, as the early church understood them, and how it still has a place in today's church?

Packiam: Absolutely. So one of the interesting things about a sacrament is "sacrament" comes from this Latin word sacramentum. And in the first century, a sacramentum was an oath of allegiance that a Roman soldier or a Roman centurion would make to Caesar. It was a pledge of fidelity—a pledge of faithfulness and allegiance. Often, it was signified by something they would have on their armor.

I think it's interesting that early Christians began to call this meal a sacrament, because what they're saying is, "This is how we show our allegiance to a different kind of King and a different kind of kingdom." But to flip the tables on that, it's actually—in a stunning move of grace—how God pledges His faithfulness to us. So what do we see when we come to the Lord's table? We see God writing His faithfulness to us in blood. It's God saying, "I am pledging myself to you, with My body and My blood. I will be your God." This is what Paul echoes in Timothy when he says that even when we are faithless, even when our allegiance fails, He will remain faithful. What a powerful thing to think of a sacrament as a moment where we remember God's pledge of faithfulness and fidelity to us.

But the other dynamic is that a few hundred years after that, Augustine—who was a church leader in North Africa in the 400s—said, "A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible

grace.”

Now I went to Oral Roberts University. I saw Oral Roberts pray over hankies. You know, we had lots of physical things that were “points of physical contact”—things that would make you think of or remember or engage your faith to word as a sign, whether you’re praying for healing or a miracle or whatever. Well, the original point of contact, if you will, is the bread and the wine. It’s the way of saying, “This is a visible sign of an invisible grace.”

We can’t see the work of the Holy Spirit. We can’t see the grace of God at work in us. But this bread and this cup are a visible sign to us. It’s a picture to us of God’s grace at work. And in a similar way that water works at baptism, in a similar way that oil works when we anoint the sick and pray for them, the bread and the cup of sacrament are an oath of fidelity and a sign of grace.

—Find Glenn Packiam on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

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## **Acres of Diamonds**

Jentezen Franklin, senior pastor of the multisite Free Chapel based in Gainesville, Georgia, explains the concept of his latest and

most important book—

*Acres of Diamonds*—with a real-life parable originally popularized by Russell H. Conwell.

“There was an old Persian farmer, and he worked hard for everything he had,” Franklin says. “A traveler comes through and tells him, ‘It’s a shame you have to work so hard with

that plow and that ox in that field day after day, when people are getting rich in India discovering diamonds.' The farmer became so discontented that he decided to sell his farm and everything he had, and he became a soldier of fortune. He left his family, saying, 'When I come back, you'll sit on your own thrones. We'll be fabulously rich.' To make a long story short again, he spent all that he had, found no diamonds of course, and ended up jumping in a river in Spain and taking his life.

"But the strange twist is the person who bought that old farm took the same plow and worked in the same fields. And as he would plow those fields, he kept digging up these black rocks. One day he put one on the mantel, and a priest saw it and said, 'Do you know that's an uncut diamond?' The man said, 'You're kidding. They're all over this property.' And sure enough, it was the world's largest mine. ... The man who took his own life felt that the acres of diamonds were out there somewhere, but he never realized that he was living in acres of diamonds."

Franklin believes the story teaches a valuable spiritual truth for believers everywhere.

"Many times, we quit too early," Franklin says. "We walk away too soon. We want everything handed to us, and we fail to understand that we're living in a place of tremendous potential right here right now. Wherever God has you, there are acres of diamonds."

Franklin says he has seen this truth illustrated over and over again in his own life—from his teenage years all the way to the present. For that reason, he says *Acres of Diamonds* is the most important book he has ever written and calls it his "life message."

"Rarely will God give you everything you ask for like you asked for it," Franklin says. "It will come in a way that you don't see coming, and it will require intense heat and

pressure and trials and walking through difficulty to reap the ultimate promise God gives you. This book was birthed out of a lot of experiences that I have gone through in my own life, family and ministry. Had I walked away, I would have walked away from acres of diamonds. By that, I mean I would have walked away from spiritual blessings and amazing things that God wanted to do in me, my family and my ministry. But we went through a season of pressure and heat—and that is required to give birth to diamonds.”

Using stories from his own life and ministry, Franklin spoke to Charisma Digital about the ways God uses the waiting period to shape us, why we should be patient with the promises of God and how Christians can discern God’s timing for their lives.

### Diamonds Under Pressure

When Franklin was 16, he witnessed Rev. Ronnie Brock preaching “under a mighty anointing” at an old-fashioned camp meeting. He had never seen anything like it. His words moved Franklin to tears—uncharacteristic for a teenage boy—and Franklin ran to the altar and prayed that God would use him for ministry.

“I never accepted the call publicly, but I knew from that moment forward that I felt like God was calling me to preach,” Franklin says.

Fast forward only a few months later, and Franklin was bedridden and out of school with sickness for weeks. For a year, he battled a skin disease and blood issue that left him covered head to toe in boils and swelling. He went from a popular kid at his high school to a social outcast—he was stuck in isolation while all of his friends had the time of their lives. He visited doctor after doctor, but none of them could offer a solution. Franklin still vividly recalls the depression and loneliness he felt during this season. The experience shattered his fragile teenage self-esteem—and softened his heart to the things of God.

“During that time, I began to develop a relationship with the Lord for myself,” Franklin says. “I began to read the Bible and listen to messages on my cassette tape player. I began to pray and seek God and cry out to Him. That one year of my affliction actually became the greatest thing that God used in my life to cause me to go into the ministry. I don’t believe I would have ended up in the ministry had I not gone through that.”

Franklin says God knew there were acres of diamonds inside him—but first, he needed to undergo the pressure and heat that produces these gems. To this day, whenever he prepares to preach, Franklin remembers his year of sickness, and it allows him to empathize with the suffering, the outcasts and the marginalized in his own church community.

“It’s one thing when you pray and nothing happens for a week, but for a 16-year-old kid to pray every day, ‘God, help me. Why don’t you heal me? Please help me,’ and receive no answer was almost more than I could take,” Franklin says. “Boy, it’s either going to destroy you or make you into something God can really use. Even that sickness was a package. It was a strangely wrapped gift to me that, looking back, I’m thankful that I went through, even as painful as it was. The same is true for other trials and tribulations I have gone through over the years. I wouldn’t be who I am or be able to relate what I can to the pain other people experience had I not gone through those highs and lows.”

The end result of that process of maturation is a focus on God over your circumstances, according to Franklin. The goal is sanctification.

“By the time God gives you your acres of diamonds, whatever it is you’re dreaming for and believe that He’s put in your heart to give you, by the time you get to it, it won’t be about that,” Franklin says. “It’ll be about Him. Because He’s sanctifying your dream. That heat and that pressure are

causing all of the impurities and motives and things in your heart—that may be selfish ambition—to come to the top.”

Still, knowing the end goal will be worth it doesn't make the suffering any easier to bear in the moment. Franklin recommends the wisdom of Psalm 1 to anyone who feels they are currently in a period of waiting and frustration.

“Psalm 1:2 says, ‘[The blessed man] meditates on the law day and night,’” he says. “The word ‘meditate’ in Hebrew means ‘to utter or speak,’ and one translation says it means ‘self-talk.’ So in the tough seasons of life, you have to have proper self-talk. You have to remind yourself that when the enemy attacks you and tries to defeat you, depress you or tell you to give up ... to say what God's Word says to you: I am a child of God. He did call me here. I will see the goodness of the Lord in this place. We will see this marriage through to victory, or we will see these children become the diamonds that God has given us. In other words, confession is very powerful.”

He also says Psalm 1 points to the importance of remaining “planted” like a tree—to be rooted in a stable community and set of spiritual disciplines.

“You have to get planted in the Word, planted in a church, planted in prayer,” Franklin says. “You have to get planted in those different seasons. So many people just uproot, and they are tumbleweeds. They blow from one move of God to the next, from one place to the next, from one church to the next, from one job to the next. When you get planted, the psalmist says, then you'll flourish.”

But despite the talk of flourishing and diamonds, Franklin is quick to clarify that he is not referring to material wealth or possessions or worldly success. When he refers to the blessings of diamonds, he is referring to the purpose and dream of God at work in someone's life—a calling more valuable

and beneficial than even the finest diamonds.

“I was a little worried that somebody would think Acres of Diamonds was just a get-rich-quick prosperity book,” Franklin says. “I believe God wants to prosper His people, but that’s not what this book is about at all. This is a book that is saying the things God has for you are already there. Everything He promised, He’s going to bring—but it may not show up in the package you thought it would come in. ... That’s what happened to Job. That’s what happened to Joseph.”

### Discerning Decisions

The decision to stay put and not chase success can be a difficult one; sometimes, it’s unclear whether a favorable opportunity seems to be God’s hand at work or a fleshly temptation. Franklin experienced this dilemma firsthand during his early years at Free Chapel, when the church was significantly smaller and less well known than it is today.

“A nationally known pastor—who is now deceased—called me,” Franklin says. “He had just built a megachurch, and he said, ‘Come. I want you to be the one who takes this ministry.’ Everything in the natural said, ‘Do it. Do it. The grass is greener on the other side. There are your acres of diamonds.’ ... This person said to me, ‘I want you to come and talk with me. I want to see if it’s a fit.’ He wanted me to begin to pray about taking this ministry.”

The move would have been a tremendous promotion for Franklin and a “financial game changer” for his family. But when he and his wife prayed and fasted about the decision, they could not get peace about it. Franklin cites the aphorism, “If it’s not quite, it’s not right.”

“I cannot underscore enough: Never move on a maybe,” Franklin says. “Never move for money. Never trade influence with people for money. There are just certain principles that the Bible teaches that we have to obey, and we could not get peace ...

[even though] everything in my flesh screamed do it.”

Instead, as he fasted and sought the Lord, Franklin felt God telling him to do the opposite: “Stay here in Gainesville, Georgia. This is the place I’ve called you to.” So Franklin turned down the offer to pastor the new megachurch. That ministry later fell apart and no longer exists. Meanwhile, Free Chapel in Gainesville has flourished.

“When you know God has called you to a place, if you’ll be faithful, that is the doorway through which God will take you to what He has for you,” Franklin says. “Big doors swing on little hinges. When you’re obedient in the little seasons and refuse to despise the day of small beginnings, God will cause the big doors to open.”

Staying put and staying content can be less glamorous or exciting than chasing new opportunities or upending your life. But patience and faithfulness are both fruits of the Holy Spirit—and will be spiritually rewarded in the end.

“Is the grass really greener on the other side?” Franklin says. “Because that man didn’t understand he was walking away from acres of diamonds. The Bible says in Ecclesiastes the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth. [Something better] is always out there: If only I had that man for my husband or that woman for my wife; if I just had that perfect family on Instagram that I follow; if I just had that church, or that success or that opportunity. God has blessed you with tremendous potential right where you are. These are acres of diamonds where you are, but you have to start digging in your own yard.”

Franklin reminds believers that success is often incremental—even Israel had to take over the promised land a little at a time, rather than all at once. Stay faithful. Persevere. And when you are truly uncertain whether God wants you to remain put or move on to a new opportunity, stay close

to God and His Word. Franklin even suggests seeking counsel from a few trusted spiritual advisers.

“Stay connected to trusted and prophetic voices and people who you know have a strong relationship with God,” Franklin says. “Don’t move without having that urge confirmed by two or three trusted voices. ... Don’t forsake the power of partnership. Know that you’re not the only one who can hear from God. For me, I need to know that my wife is at peace with a major move. I need to know that other trusted voices that I’ve learned to lean on are at peace with what I believe God is telling me to do.”

And though Franklin can share many stories of times he has correctly stayed put and obeyed God’s voice, he wonders sometimes how many times he has failed to do so—and missed out on the resulting benefits. He doesn’t want others to have those same regrets.

“Just think of what that man walked away from,” Franklin says. “I guess that’s why that story touched me so much when I heard it. How many things have I walked away from that were acres of diamonds, had I just not given up on it?”

### On God’s Time

People today take the concept of time for granted, but Franklin points out that time used to be a matter of guesswork.

“For a long time in America, there were no clocks and people just guessed at what time it was based on the sun,” Franklin says. “Then someone finally put a clock up, maybe on the steeple of a church where everyone could see, but even then, who could be sure if it was consistent city to city and state to state? Sometimes time would be off from 30 minutes to an hour in any given city.

“But when the railroads were built, they could not allow

trains to be late and crash into each other. So the government created a standard time that everyone would set their clocks to. ... Some cities rebelled and refused initially, but in the end, everyone complied.”

Franklin pauses, as if to let the story sink in, and then concludes the story: “Here’s the point. We do the same thing with God. We’re on our time, and we think things should happen according to our plans. But we have to get synchronized with God’s clock, with God’s timing.”

He says understanding and obeying God’s timing requires cultivating a deep relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. It requires reading the Word, praying and even fasting. (“The bigger the decision, the more attention I give to fasting and prayer,” Franklin says.)

Often, God wants His people to stay put and exercise patience. But other times, when they are aligned with His will, His timing may be even faster than anticipated. Franklin gives the example of his debut into TV broadcasting as one such example.

Free Chapel had just built and moved into its first sanctuary when Franklin received a call from televangelist R.W. Schambach. Schambach was in Atlanta that weekend and asked to hold a Sunday night service at Free Chapel. Franklin agreed, eager to meet this famous preacher.

When Sunday night came, Schambach was late and went onstage without getting to speak with Franklin beforehand. He began his remarks by saying, “The Lord spoke to me during [worship] that this church and this pastor are supposed to be on TV. We’re going to take up an offering and buy his TV equipment right now.”

Schambach took up a cash offering and raised \$138,000. Franklin and his team went out and bought cameras within a few days and began filming programs for local cable TV. That’s how his now-international television ministry first began.

“In my mind, TV was something I knew I was supposed to do, but it was three years out,” Franklin says. “We were in debt. We had just moved into a new building. We needed staff. We needed money. We needed furniture. We needed all kinds of things. ... I would have sat around and maybe missed that opportunity forever for us. But God had a greater plan, and we’ve got to be open to His plan and understand where we are right now. The concept of “now” is so powerful, and so many times we let someday or one day stop us from seeing the acres of diamonds that God has for us right now—today.”

Franklin hopes his book and message will inspire other believers to see God’s blessings in motion within their own lives and ministries—right where they are now.

“I feel like this book is a message of hope and encouragement,” he says. “I feel like it’s going to save marriages, ministries, businesses and dreams. Don’t become impatient for the Lord to act. You have to hold on sometimes. You have to wait on the Lord. You have to stand and not fall, right where you are planted. And when you’ve stood as long as you can stand, keep standing and don’t give up.”

READ MORE: To learn more about Jentezen Franklin and Acres of Diamonds, visit [.](#)  or go to

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# Morris Cerullo: How Jesus Demonstrates the Image of God

What does the image of God entail? Preacher Morris Cerullo—in an archived clip recently posted to his official YouTube channel—argues it comes from a believer’s “innermost being,” and says Jesus modeled it well.

“Where is the image of God?” Cerullo says. “It’s inside our spirit. It’s in our innermost being. ... Christ had this position of knowing from His innermost being. That’s why He could walk through Calvary, that’s why he could walk through all the circumstances. Because of that inner knowing.”

What else does the image of God entail, and how does it intersect with Jesus’ purpose? He explains further in the embedded video.