

Bill Johnson: Burning to See the Nations on Fire for Jesus

Bill Johnson was born for revival, but he didn't start burning and shining for Jesus until he was a full-grown man. Though he was a pastor's kid in a Spirit-filled church, the thought of circling the globe teaching hungry believers how to host the presence and release the power of God never once crossed his mind. Bill had his heart set on becoming a professional baseball player.

God had different plans and used an evangelist named Mario Murillo—whose ministry was born in the drug-obsessed, occult-saturated atmosphere in the epicenter of the violent student revolution in Berkeley, California—to get Bill's attention. Through Murillo's persuasive gospel messages about absolute abandonment to Christ mixed with raw healing, the Holy Spirit conquered Bill's heart. Today, he's a fifth-generation pastor on his dad's side and a fourth-generation pastor on his mom's side.

"I grew up in a very good Christian home and had a fear of God, and while I never lived in out-and-out rebellion, neither was I a passionate follower of Jesus," Bill told me in the studios at Bethel Church in Redding, California, where he serves as senior leader. "One Saturday night, alone, I finally said yes to God—the absolute yes. For me, everything changed that night. My dad started teaching about worship and encounters with the presence of God, and I learned by experience that I don't want to live without this. I'm still learning how to give Him a place where He has a profound influence on how I think and live."

Over the past 45-plus years since that decisive night, Bill has learned plenty about the ways of God. He realized Holy Spirit lives in every believer but does not rest on every

believer. He discovered Holy Spirit is in us for our sake, but He comes upon us for others' sakes. He grasped the reality that Holy Spirit comes upon you so you can release the kingdom into broken situations so Jesus can be glorified. Bill has taught millions of believers around the world with ears to hear how to walk with the Spirit of God.

"What you focus on—the kingdom you're aware of—is what you release into the atmosphere around you," Bill says. "You're actually influencing your surroundings by what's going on inside. The world is filled with unbelief and sin and so many horrible things. The kingdom of God is filled with perfect trust and peace. You will always reflect the nature of the world you're most aware of."

When Miracles Started Breaking Out

Bill certainly reflects the character of Christ, but miracles, signs and wonders did not always mark his ministry. Under the leadership of his father in 1978, Bethel Church sent Bill to pastor Mountain Chapel in Weaverville, California, before he finally experienced what he points to as his "greatest breakthrough" in ministry nine years later.

"I would read about revivals," Bill recalls. "I would read about John G. Lake and pray for people. Nothing ever happened. I just assumed you had to have a special gift for healing and I didn't have it. I would try for a while and back off and get discouraged. I went to a John Wimber conference and heard him teach the same things I had been teaching for a couple of years—but they had the fruit of what they believed. I just had a theory. I realized I needed to take more risks and just not stop. It was the weirdest thing. When I came back, the miracles started."

Bill pastored in Weaverville for 17 years before moving his family back to Redding, California, in 1996 to take the baton from his father and assume leadership of Bethel Church. He

came with one non-negotiable condition: He was born for revival and would pursue revival. When Bill took the reigns, the outpouring started almost immediately in seed form and a harvest of miracle healings, including multiple cases of cancer, followed in the months ahead.

Today, Bethel has become a true movement in the body of Christ with the local church, the school of ministry, a media group, Bethel Music and a network of thousands of congregations around the world, but Bill is quick to point out that it's all about a person—and it's not him. Rather, it's about Jesus and His heart being revealed in us, to us and through us. With that in mind, Bill has committed to create an atmosphere at Bethel where God is glorified and people are set free.

“The atmosphere issue is a big deal for me,” Bill says. “The two things that I keep focusing on the most are the principles of the kingdom and the presence of the King. If I can keep those two things in focus, we find that He ends up doing more stuff. You end up having more stuff happen by accident than we ever used to have on purpose. When the glory of God begins to come into the room, I'm not going to stop that to teach. I don't have anything that important to say. To me, it's all about the presence.”

Bill recalls one Sunday morning when two people were healed of broken necks during worship. Another Sunday morning, a woman had a tumor disappear that doctors couldn't even remove with surgery. Of all the many miracles recorded and verified at Bethel, the one that fascinates him most was the 12-year-old boy whose family flew him in from Norway. He was fed intravenously for 10 years and confined to a wheelchair because his muscles were deteriorating. His parents did not know if he would live through the long journey, but they came believing.

“The family was so engaged with the anointing,” Bill shares. “They went to a restaurant afterward and gave him a piece of

bread to smell because he enjoyed that ... and he ate it. There was this moment of terror because he can't digest food and his temperature within moments would rise to 106. He was dramatically, dramatically healed. And they did a book in Norway about it. It's just absolutely stunning. But that will mark you. That will change you."

Not everyone who comes to Bethel gets healed, but Bill refuses to blame or question God—and he has committed to cultivate an atmosphere and building faith for healing at Bethel for one biblical reason: Everyone who came to Jesus believing was healed.

"It's the only acceptable standard," Bill says. "I can either lower the Scripture to my level of experience or I can fight to raise my level of experience to the standard of the Scripture—and that's what I've chosen to do. As a result, there's heartache. There are times when you miss it. There are times when loved ones and dear friends die. There's no explanation. I don't need an explanation. I don't ever ask why. I know if Jesus were in these shoes, they would've been healed."

Life-Changing Encounters With God

Bill told me there was a time when his hunger for God, revival and miracles was so deep it would send him into depression. He got so discouraged at times he became self-critical.

"I would honestly confess sins I never committed just to cover my bases in case there was a wrong thought or attitude—it just became about me," he reveals. "There's something wrong when it's all about you. It just came to this point where ... I don't want to say I made an agreement or contract with God, but it's kind of how it worked out for me. I said, 'Father, I'm in Your Word every day, every day. I don't miss a day. And You said it's like a sword. I'm inviting you to cut me deep. If I need the slap of a friend, please give me the slap of a friend.'"

In that moment, Bill stopped looking at himself and started crying out to God for fire to burn within him. In his experience, desperation for God takes people to a fork in the road—they either move into faith or unbelief. You can end up offended because of what God didn't do or truly abandon yourself to God in faith without striving. He cautions believers everywhere not to let true hunger lead to an unhealthy frustration.

"If God is my servant, He will continually frustrate me," Bill says. "If I'm His, I will constantly be amazed."

After the initial encounter with God during Murillo's fiery 1970 message, the Holy Spirit opened Bill's eyes in 1979 to revelation in Isaiah 60—"Arise, shine for your light has come. The glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness will cover the earth, deep darkness the peoples. But His light will appear upon you. His glory will arise upon you." He describes it as a subtle encounter with the Word of God.

"As I was reading that portion of Scripture—the entire chapter, actually—it just seemed to come alive, and I felt like the Lord was speaking to me that this was a prophetic word for the church in that hour," Bill says. "I stopped and spent time there just praying over it and reading it over again and again and again. It just became alive. It wouldn't be an understatement to say that experience—that Scripture come alive to me has affected every day of my life since then."

The next encounter was not so subtle. Bill had been asking for more of God and praying so much he would wake himself up praying in his sleep. His prayer sounded like this: "God, I want more of You at any cost. I'll pay any price." Suddenly and in a frightening way, God answered his prayers. At 3 a.m. one morning, he woke up with the power of God surging through his body. He says felt like he was being electrocuted. He told me he actually felt his face turn red from embarrassment

because of how he looked even though nobody could see him.

"I had no control of my limbs," Bill recalls. "I had control of my head. That's all. As soon as it started, I went from dead sleep to wide awake in a millisecond. I remember Jacob walked with a limp after his encounter. It affected how he walked. Mary was mother of the illegitimate child through her encounter. And so there was the question. 'Did you mean it when you said you want more at any cost?' I didn't know if I'd ever be out of bed the rest of my life."

"If I said yes, I didn't know if I'd ever function again. And so probably 25 minutes or so, a half-hour into this, tears were just streaming down my cheeks. I set the side of my face under the pillow. I said, 'I'll take it.' I said, 'If I get You in exchange, You can do anything you want. I don't care.' So He was looking for me to give up my right to dignity. That changed everything."

Bill Behind the Scenes

Kris Vallotton, senior associate leader of Bethel and co-founder of the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry, met Bill when he was 24 and lived with the Johnson family for six months. He told me there is no difference between the public Bill and the private Bill, except that he seems extroverted in the pulpit but is an introvert at heart.

"Bill is very quiet," Kris told me. "You could ride in a car with him, and if you don't talk to him, he won't talk. He's the most generous person I've ever met in my life. I've watched Bill and Beni give their food away and then pray in food for the week. He won't enter into a negative conversation about anybody. He's more likely to pray about a problem with someone than talk to them about it, and he is very forgiving."

It may be difficult to believe, but Bill says he was never called into the ministry. He volunteered to help his dad at Bethel. He led the single adults. He taught Sunday school. He

worked with young people on the streets during the hippie era. He helped with print publications. He helped in the bookstore. Wherever his dad needed help, he was there. But he always thought in the back of his mind it was short term.

“I didn’t like to talk in front of people,” Bill says. “I would take an ‘F’ on an exam if it meant talking in front of people. I hated to read. My parents thought my brother might be a pastor. But for me, they were just hoping I’d get to heaven. I was about three years into serving as staff for my dad when it hit me. I have a heart for this. The whole thought of talking in front of people and the stuff I do now terrified me. In God’s mercy, He just let me grow into it.”

Randy Clark, founder of Global Awakening, met Bill in 1994 at a conference. He told me Bill has an “amazing hunger” for God and is “more committed to pursuing revival than anybody I know.” John G. Lake—a Canadian-born healing evangelist who saw over 100,000 healings in the healing rooms ministry he founded in Spokane, Washington, in the early 1900s—is one of Bill’s heroes. That’s because of Lake’s understanding of the unseen world and how to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to bring breakthrough into people’s lives. Bill also loves Evan Roberts, the revivalist credited with leading the Welsh Revival that saw hundreds of thousands of souls come to Christ in a two-year period, for his childlike faith and joy.

“In addition to revival, Bill has pursued signs and wonders and healing more than anybody I know,” Randy told me. “Bill Johnson is a man who’s kind, gentle, loving and a great father. He was a great son to his father. He is as loyal as you’ll ever find. He’s more of an introvert who really enjoys his time alone with study and with God. He’s authentic. What you see on the stage is what you see off stage. Bill talks about the same passion.”

Banning Liebscher, senior director of Jesus Culture, was on staff at Bethel Church in Redding for 18 years and launched

Jesus Culture Sacramento Church in 2014. He was 19 years old when he came on staff and told me Bill “massively shaped” who he is and how he thinks.

“Bill has kingdom priorities down like no one I have ever met,” Liebscher says. “Bill has a passion to host the presence of God and see cities experience an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, but he is not an ambitious man. He just wants to be faithful and obedient to what God is asking.”

Indeed, when I asked Bill Johnson, 65, what he wants to be remembered for, he didn’t point to the miracles, signs and wonders. He didn’t point to revival. He didn’t point to a sermon. He didn’t point to a megachurch. In truth, he really doesn’t care if anyone remembers him at all—and he didn’t hesitate to offer a simple yet profound answer: “I want to be remembered for being faithful, that I did what He said.”

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