

Spirit-Filled Pastor: My Midnight Encounter With Holy Spirit

One of the advantages of growing up in a preacher's home is the exposure to my dad's tireless work as a pastor, and also to the many notable preachers and evangelists who put Victoria Tabernacle—my dad's church—on their itineraries.

One of the largest churches in the United States at the time, Victoria Tabernacle drew some of the best preachers in the world, and I loved listening to them. One of those preachers who held a revival at our church was Ralph Wilkerson. Some might remember him as the founder of Melodyland Christian Center, for several decades one of the largest and most influential churches in the country.

Before Wilkerson turned it into a church, Melodyland was a popular 3,200-seat musical theater attracting the great performers of the 1960s, including The Dave Clark Five, Bobby Darin, James Brown, the Grateful Dead and Connie Stevens. Just down Harbor Boulevard from Disneyland in Anaheim, California, Melodyland became known as a church that ministered to people many churches ignored: drug addicts, prostitutes, the poor and people of different races and cultures.

When Wilkerson came to our church, I was 13. Although I knew I was a Christian, I hadn't been filled with the Holy Spirit, and that bothered me. In fact, I was afraid it might never happen.

Brother Wilkerson was known as a "Holy Ghost preacher." In addition to inviting sinners to come forward to accept Jesus into their hearts, he challenged every Christian to be filled with the Holy Spirit. When he gave the invitation every night during the revival at our church, I practically ran to the

altar, knelt and asked God to fill me with the Holy Spirit. I stayed until midnight, praying to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

But night after night, I went home disappointed. The last night of the revival, I decided I was going to stay until the Lord filled me with the Holy Spirit, no matter how long it took. All my life I'd heard my dad and others teach that inviting Jesus into your heart was absolutely necessary for the forgiveness of our sins and the reward of spending eternity with God in heaven, but God offers even more: We can be filled with His Spirit. I desperately wanted that to happen in my life.

On that final night, the altar was lined with people who came forward and were filled with the Holy Spirit, which always caused great rejoicing from those who had knelt beside them. Even as I prayed and struggled, I heard the shouts of joy from those to my left and right. I wanted what they had received, but by midnight, I was the last seeker at the altar.

Everyone else had left except an elderly man named Brother Brown and a little lady named Sister Angel. These two dear people stayed to pray with me.

After another hour passed, Brother Brown got up to leave. He assured me he would continue praying that God would fill me with His Spirit, but the sound of the big church door closing followed by the rumble of his car felt like a bad omen. I wondered, *Maybe it'll never happen. Maybe for whatever reason God doesn't want to give me this gift.*

All my life I'd been taught that if I repented of my sins and got baptized, I would be filled with the Holy Spirit. I had done both. I'd also been taught that all I need to do is ask God for this gift, and He would give it to me. I'd done a lot of asking, and once again I was on my knees asking for this precious gift. But long after midnight, I was all alone except

for Sister Angel, and nothing seemed to be happening.

After another hour, she told me she had to leave. She explained that she had kids at home who needed to go to school in a few hours. From the look on her face, it was obvious she felt anguished about leaving me alone, and I felt even worse that she had stayed so long with nothing to show for it.

Then it happened.

As I heard the sound of her footsteps fade as she walked toward the back of the church, I felt the power of God's Spirit flow through me, and I experienced the fullness of the Holy Spirit! As soon as she heard my joy-filled praise, she came running up to the altar. That's when I also learned that God must have a great sense of humor. When Sister Angel got excited, her P's came out accompanied with a small spray of spit. At that moment, she got close to give me a big hug and began shouting "Praise Him! Praise Him!"—and I got a shower.

It was a special kind of baptism! I call it "praise in my face." I didn't mind at all because she was so happy for me, and I was relieved to finally receive this wonderful gift from God. From that moment, my life was changed forever.

This is an adaptation from Tommy Barnett's newly released autobiography, What If? {eo}

Pastor Tommy Barnett is the global pastor of one of the largest Assembly of God churches in the U.S., Dream City Church in Phoenix, Arizona. The church has become known as "The Church with a Heart" because of its more than 260 ministry outreaches. In 1994, he and his son Matthew co-founded The Dream Center in Los Angeles, an inner-city church and outreach center that touches the lives of 50,000 people each month. Pastor Barnett is also the chancellor of Southeastern University.