

God Turns Spirit-Filled Preacher's Worst Nightmare Into Divine Blessing

I grew up in a preacher's home. Both my father and grandfather were well-known, successful pastors. Ever since I was 16, I have known that God was calling me to be a pastor too.

That may help explain my naive but genuine enthusiasm when, in September 1994, I headed to Los Angeles with my dad, Tommy Barnett, who had been asked to help turn around a struggling congregation in a desperate part of downtown LA. Dad was already pastoring a very large, well-known and influential church, First Assembly of God in Phoenix. The leaders of his denomination were hoping that while he continued to pastor the church in Phoenix, he could also provide the kind of leadership that would restore spiritual health to the failing church in LA. He accepted the assignment and decided this would be a good opportunity to give me greater experience in church leadership.

The plan was for my dad and me to be co-pastors. He would fly in from Phoenix on Thursday mornings and stay with me until late Saturday, just in time to catch the last flight back to Phoenix for his Sunday morning services. Meanwhile, I'd be stationed at Bethel Temple full time, learning under my dad's expert, seasoned guidance.

I was 20 years old at the time. I had never been to Los Angeles, but I was brimming with confidence as I loaded my stuff in our car and drove to LA with my dad, eager to embrace the chance to bring spiritual health to that declining church. And not just any church—it was Bethel Temple, one of the first churches birthed out of the historic Azusa Street Revival. The denomination was determined that such a historic church should

not die, and I was just as determined that if it did, it wouldn't be on my watch.

What I did not fully comprehend when we left Phoenix was the current state of that church. Bethel Temple was located in a hard to find, dangerous neighborhood. It was an ethnic area; I quickly discovered that I was the only white guy in the vicinity. The church needed a new pastor because the current one was retiring; he was 80 years old. That meant the church would transition from having the oldest active pastor in the denomination to the youngest! The congregation, once vibrant, had dwindled down to just 39 members, of whom the average age was close to that of their exiting pastor. Oh, and did I mention that most of them spoke only Filipino? I didn't even know what Filipino was.

Despite the paltry size of the church, I was excited. Imagine being only 20 years old and having a church to pastor in the second largest city in the country! I was absolutely determined to build God a great church. In fact, that became my life's mission: *to build God a great church.*

Well, things didn't go exactly as I had expected. I preached my heart out, but in no time at all I had grown the church from 39 people to zero. I don't mean 12 people or five, I mean there was actually a service when not one person showed up! You know the old question, "If a tree falls in the forest and nobody is there to hear it, did it make any noise?" Well, I can tell you the noise that's made in a church when no one shows up for the services: It's the weeping of its discouraged pastor.

From the day I arrived, my time was consumed by doing all the things I believed a godly, successful pastor would do. My life had been spent preparing for this opportunity. I'd read church-growth books. I had attended numerous conferences where I'd listened with rapt attention to pastors of large churches talk about their strategies. My bedroom wall at home was

plastered with poster after poster of motivational quotes and inspirational photos. I didn't see Bethel Temple as a dying church; I saw it as a church in the early stages of being restored to greatness.

So, when the church continued to die a slow and painful death, I just couldn't understand what God was doing. I was pretty sure I knew what He wasn't doing: He wasn't answering my prayers. He wasn't bringing people to the church. He wasn't restoring a historic church to greatness. He wasn't helping me build a great church. And He sure wasn't concerned about my desire to be a successful pastor.

So, one Sunday, about three months into my tenure—after yet another disastrous church service—I returned to my tiny apartment, collapsed on the bed and let loose, saturating my pillow with tears of frustration and muffled cries of anguish and despair. I felt like an utter failure, a total fool. And of course, when you fail in service to God, the guilt is as deep as the ocean: I hadn't just failed; I had failed God! In my solitary mourning, I kept asking God why this was happening and what He wanted from me.

No response.

My emptiness knew no bounds. I felt I was being faithful to Him, so wasn't He supposed to be faithful to me? What did He want?

Finally, He was ready to tell me. While tossing and turning that night, failing to get any real rest, I sensed His presence. It was very late at night, sometime after midnight, but I felt led to walk a few blocks to Echo Park. That's the center of our section of downtown Los Angeles. Trust me, there had to have been a sure sense of God's leading because no young white kid would feel safe in Echo Park in broad daylight, much less in the dead of night. But I dutifully trudged down there, still praying silently for God to bring

clarity to my confusion.

I got to the park. What was once a beautiful oasis of lush greenery surrounding graceful swans peacefully paddling around a clear pond with a sparkling fountain in the center, was now a mossy body of stagnant water with floating litter and derelicts passed out around its perimeter. The noise and activity in the area shocked me too. After all, it was well past midnight on a Sunday night, yet the place was abuzz.

Of course, the activity was not what you might expect. It was like one giant urban crime scene. It was what I imagined a movie set would be like if a studio were there filming a movie depicting a police force's worst nightmare.

To my left were three police cars with twirling red lights ablaze. Behind the vehicles, five armed police officers surrounded two young men sporting handcuffs and leaning spread eagle against the wall of an apartment building. To my right were a bunch of drunks sitting on the sidewalk and on the front steps of a couple of buildings, with brown paper bags in their hands or at their feet, the ever-present accessory of the alcoholic crowd. Two wobbling drunks were dissing each other in slurred tones, getting ready to square off—or maybe pass out, whichever happened first. There was a helicopter overhead with its powerful searchlight trained on a spot in a nearby neighborhood, presumably assisting street officers in locating an escaping criminal. There were homeless people with shopping carts, drug deals going down in the shadows and pregnant teenagers looking frightened and very alone.

Honestly, it was like a cartoon—an exaggeration of every ill you try to avoid in the big city, all clustered into a single area adjacent to the park. If I hadn't been so haggard over my own desperate situation, I would have laughed at the magnitude of the calamity—and then run for my life!

Instead, I stood there, taking it all in. I thought, *So, this*

is where You brought me, Lord, from the secure suburbs of my upbringing in the desert to the squalor and hopelessness of Los Angeles. Not the Beverly Hills or Malibu portions of Los Angeles, mind you, but this ground zero of human depravity. It's bad enough that you give me a dying church, but a dying neighborhood, too?

I stared at the scene and silently yelled out to Him one more time.

"Look at this mess, Lord! You brought me here. I came willingly, full of hope and excitement and passion. I came here to build You a great church."

At that moment I heard God speak to me—not in an audible voice, but in the clearest of impressions, an unmistakable reply: "I did not bring you here to build a great church. I brought you here to build people. You build the people. I'll build the church."

Slapped down by God! And He wasn't done.

"I don't ever want you to talk or even think about 'success' again. Think about being a blessing. Success is obedience to your calling; I have called you to bless these people. Love them. Heal them. Help them. Serve them."

There was a pause as I absorbed that thought. Then came His closing argument.

"I love these people. If you reach the people that nobody wants, I'll send you the people that everybody wants."

Stunned, I sat down on a stoop a couple of feet away. *Build people.* It was as if we'd been in a boxing ring and my opponent had slugged me really hard and repeatedly in the stomach. *Serve them.* I wanted to hear from God, and I did. As is often the case, it was not what I expected or perhaps even what I wanted to hear. *Reach the people that nobody wants.* But

it was exactly what I needed to hear. *Bless these people.*

Now I watched all the things taking place around me with new eyes. As understanding settled in, I could feel the excitement of a great cause beginning to build within me. It no longer mattered that I was only 20 or that I was a white guy in a nonwhite neighborhood. That nobody turned up at my church service or that the denomination probably had something different in mind seemed less important now. What mattered was that I'd heard from God, and I knew that if I was willing to bless these outcasts and social losers, something great was going to happen. It was inevitable. After all, God was on my side.

This was my congregation. They just didn't know it yet.

Somehow my worst nightmare had turned into my greatest thrill. After a well-intentioned false start, I was finally en route to fulfilling my cause. God was in it. Clearly, this was going to be one wild ride. {eo}

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The above is an excerpt from Matthew Barnett's book, *The Cause Within You*.