

Jentezen Franklin: We Need to Be Honest About the Elephant in the Room

As senior pastor of the multi-campus megachurch Free Chapel, Jentezen Franklin could let the size and scope of his ministry go to his head. But if that's ever a temptation, he has close friends in ministry, his wife and their five grown children to bring him back to earth.

"I've got an older bishop pastor who is 84 years old and speaks into my life," Franklin said. "I've got peers who are my age. We've grown up in ministry and have done things in ministry all of our lives, watched our churches grow. It's been a journey, and they've been on the journey with me."

Because of their long relationship, these friends know when Franklin needs accountability or support.

"They can tell when I'm having trouble," he said. "They know when Cherise and I need a good talking-to. They know when I'm going through something with one of my kids. You don't tell all your business to everybody, but boy, if you've got two or three good people who are good sounding boards who you can talk to, that is critical for a pastor."

Franklin's wife, Cherise, is very involved in the ministry as well, working with a world-class women's program and serving as the chief advisor and host of three major conferences per year. And with her background in building design and construction, Cherise has been involved in planning and coordination for all of Free Chapel's locations.

She and her husband share their life together in their recently released book, *Love Like You've Never Been Hurt: Hope, Healing and the Power of an Open Heart*. In its pages,

they reflect on “real, raw ministry” and family life in the public eye.

“People see you in front of thousands of people or on television, but we have a real family,” he said.

The Franklins have raised four daughters and a son. Now empty-nesters with two grandchildren, they admit to their disappointments and failures.

“The things that we’ve gone through are not different from anybody else’s family,” he said. “Yet we had to deal with them. And I had to preach through some of these storms that we went through. How do you do that? How do you hold your family together? How do you make it through the storm? That’s the heart of the book.”

The Franklins know they are not alone in these trials.

“So many pastors, pastors’ wives and pastors’ families are desperately hurting, and nobody’s talking about that elephant in the room,” he said. “Marriages are in trouble, and we need to get brutally honest enough to understand that there really are answers and that we need some kind of accountability in ministry.”

In leading such a large congregation, Franklin has seen problem after problem in families.

“Christian families are just in a mess,” he said. “The body of Christ is full of parents who are estranged from their children. I hear it all the time. ‘I haven’t spoken to my child in a year.’ ‘I haven’t seen my grandchild since he was born.’ ‘We just don’t get along.’ ‘There’s got to be something we do.’ ‘We live across town and we don’t talk.’ I hear this stuff. ‘We don’t talk.’ ‘We’ve been offended at one another.’ ‘We’ve gotten hurt.’”

Some leaders are dealing with a family member on drugs, a

daughter who is pregnant or a son who says he's gay. Franklin dealt with the latter in his congregation, and he dedicates a chapter of the book to how it was handled.

"We can pretend that stuff doesn't happen. The truth is it's happening. How do I manifest love in those kinds of situations? It's never wrong to love. Here's a big one: You never compromise your faith or your belief in the Bible to love. It's never lowering your standard to love."

In fact, Franklin wrote the book to remind people that love never fails.

"If somebody does something that really offends you, it may take a while," he said. "It gives an illustration in there of a ketchup bottle. You have to hit it and hit it until finally what's been under pressure is released. That's kind of how our journey has been in some of the situations we've had to deal with. But love never fails."

Preaching Through the Fear

The pastor with a delightful drawl and a rather unusual name—his mother got creative with the Jantzen Sportswear brand name—has a strong ministry heritage. He never expected to preach, but God had other plans.

Musically gifted, Franklin played the saxophone so well he earned a full ride to college. He played a number of other instruments—including piano, bass guitar and drums—and then added singing to his skills, which pushed him more to the front of the platform.

Franklin committed his life to Christ at age 16. He calls it "one of those God-moments that really changes your life."

Raised a pastor's kid, church life had a profound effect on him.

"Being raised in it has its ups and downs and its pluses and

minuses," he said. "Dad always pastored pretty small churches, and there were a lot of challenges. When we were growing up, our whole lives were basically around the church. On Saturdays, I would cut the church's grass, and my brothers and sisters had to clean the church and get it ready. We would sweep the bottom out and put the bulletins in and make sure the hymn books were all set."

His dad's little country church in North Carolina became the place where he began to develop his musical talent. He was always his "dad's musician," so initially he thought he was headed that way in life.

In fact, there was one significant reason Franklin didn't want to preach.

"I was terrified of crowds, terrified of public speaking," he said.

But when his dad asked him to teach the junior boys class, he went for it.

"I had a hunger for the Word when I was about 18, and that class began to grow," he said. "I was just terrified the first lesson. But I think that there was a gift there that I wasn't aware of, and the more I did it, the more I got relaxed with it. It was my training ground, that little Sunday school. The class packed out, and it was cool to see that."

Engaging those kids with the gospel "got in my heart," Franklin said, but he went on to pursue his dream of musical performance at Barton College in Wilson, North Carolina.

One of his brothers preached for a series of revivals during the summer and asked Franklin to do the music. That was also when he decided to go on a three-day fast.

"I really wanted God to do something that summer in my life," he said. "I felt a stirring, a dissatisfaction. 'God, I'm kind

of desperate, and I need to know that I'm on the right track.'"

That's when the call came.

"On the third day, I knew without a doubt that God had called me to preach," Franklin said. "And I asked, 'God would you please confirm it and help me in ways that only I would know?' And He did that in some pretty amazing ways."

Persuaded of his call, he announced he was going to preach and told his family he sensed God wanted him to change direction in life. His brother Richie, a traveling evangelist, chimed in with an invitation for Jentezen to speak at a revival he was to hold the following week, which gave Jentezen his first preaching opportunity.

"I stumbled through the message, but some people were saved," he said. "I became addicted to seeing people come to Christ, and that began my ministry."

Soon, instead of just having the services on weekends, the pastor extended the revival to include weeknights too. At the suggestion to extend the revival, the people stood to their feet and clapped.

"I was terrified because I didn't have any more sermons," he said. "But my dad helped me, and he would write me little sermon outlines and bulletins and talk to me. I had sat under him all of my life. And to make a long story short, we got busy and got going that weekend."

Franklin never went back to his music. His preaching schedule simply wouldn't allow it.

"We booked up and we went for three years after that," he said. "I got married, my brother got married, and we went our separate ways. And then Free Chapel came into our lives."

Finding His Place at Free Chapel

Franklin's father was part of Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee, and as a traveling evangelist, Franklin was too. He was happy in his role, but God moved him to an interdenominational church in a rather unusual way.

"My wife's grandmother went to a little church in Gainesville, Georgia, called Free Chapel," he said. "Her pastor asked my wife and me to come hold a revival there."

Finding a strong connection with Roy Wellborn and with the congregation, Free Chapel booked Franklin annually for revival. The second or third year, the pastor had booked Franklin about nine months in advance for a particular Sunday.

Then something unexpected and difficult happened. The pastor became ill and died the Friday night of the weekend Franklin was booked to speak at the church.

"He was the only pastor that they had ever had," Franklin said. "The church was about 300 people, and they loved him. He was a fatherly, great, good man."

But the board still wanted Franklin to come "because the church needs a trusted voice and everybody knows you," they told him.

After he preached Sunday morning, it was time for the pastor's funeral.

"As soon as service was over, they rolled in the coffin and had the funeral of their pastor."

"While I preached that morning, I felt like that Scripture kept coming in my heart that they are like sheep without a shepherd, and they need a shepherd," he said. "And I knew that God was dealing with me about pastoring."

It didn't take long. The board called him within a couple of weeks to become Free Chapel's new pastor.

“I shunned him and told him all my excuses of why I wouldn’t,” Franklin said. “But I had that little voice of the Spirit saying, ‘You need to do this.’ And then it was my wife who said, ‘I think we ought to do this, and you really need to fast and pray about it.’”

At yet another critical point when he needed to hear from the Lord, he went on a three-day fast.

“Sure enough, God got me in alignment with what He wanted me to do instead of what I wanted to do,” Franklin said. “And so we went to Free Chapel and became the pastor, and it’s been an amazing ride.”

Continuing the heritage of family ministry, Franklin’s mother is also employed by Free Chapel, where he has served since 1989.

“My mother, who is 82 years old, is on staff and has been on staff for about 15 or 16 years, and she does our seniors and our rest home ministry,” he said. “That is her passion. She does about 17 rest home services a month.”

Experiencing Growth in the Church

Free Chapel has come a long way. Attendance is now 20,000, with multiple services each week. Franklin describes the church as being “about seeing people come to Christ and then inspiring them to live for Christ.”

Apparently, the congregation has done both those things well. Not only has Free Chapel grown in numbers but also in campuses. The church has five locations—three in Georgia, one in South Carolina and one in California—and is launching two more this year.

“One is a beautiful new building in midtown Atlanta,” Franklin said. “It’s been a dream of mine for over 20 years. It opens in April.”

The seventh location opens in Forsyth County, Georgia, in fall 2018.

Franklin knows God placed him where he is. The fruit is in his life and in his church.

“I think it’s critically important that you know that God has called you to the place that you are,” he said. “Some people would say that it doesn’t matter where you go, but I believe there’s a place of your assignment. And for us, it was Gainesville, Georgia. It wasn’t Atlanta, it wasn’t L.A. at that time. It wasn’t Dallas. We would reach all of those places all over the world, but I knew there was no doubt in my mind that I was supposed to come here, and we were all-in. We left the denomination we were in. They were great people. We left right, we left good and we left with their blessing. But we knew this was the place we had to go.”

Along with being in the right place, it is critical to be open to the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

“There were those transitional moments,” Franklin recalled. “I think you constantly have to go with change if you’re going to see a ministry grow. We could not stay at the same level and hold on to the same traditions and styles. You have to be relevant.”

Being relevant can sometimes mean change to a pastor’s platform and presentation.

“You need a lot of young people around you helping you connect to this generation,” Franklin said. “And that’s why my family has been such a blessing to me. We have five kids, and my wife and I have been married 30 years. I’ve pretty much had a teenager in my house for 20 years. Getting that kind of feedback from kids—they’re brutally honest—they’ll tell you, ‘You need to check this out, Dad. This is what’s going on.’ We don’t change our message, but we sure can change our presentation.”

There was a time when Free Chapel's service needed an update in its music. Franklin saw what was possible when Brian Houston of Hillsong asked him to preach at his church in Australia.

"Darlene Zschech had written that song, 'Shout to the Lord,' and they were really beginning to be a force in the body of Christ, especially in the area of worship," Franklin said. "We were real traditional in our worship. We still had the choir robes, and there's nothing wrong with that if that is what God's called you to be. But we knew we were missing a demographic of younger people and couples."

Franklin believed his visit to Hillsong was a "divine encounter," because he saw a model of the church enjoying worship in a more relaxed atmosphere.

When he returned saying, "I want that," the music began to change. It was another critical development in the life of what was to become a significant interdenominational megachurch.

And somewhere along the way, Franklin got over his fear and grew into an exceptional preacher.

"Not the least of Jentezen's considerable skills is his preaching," said Dr. Mark Rutland, founder and president of Global Servants, who often preaches at Franklin's church. "He is a talented musician, a pastor, a leader and an author, but above all of these, Jentezen Franklin is a preacher's preacher. His content is rich, and his style has been honed to a keen edge. More than all that, however, when he preaches, the good hand of the Lord is upon him in a remarkable way."

Beyond Free Chapel's campuses, the church extends its ministry through media around the globe. Listeners can hear Franklin on his self-titled podcast, and viewers can watch services on the television broadcast *Kingdom Connection*. Each broadcast has the potential to reach 2.3 billion viewers.

Becoming a Fasting Church

Free Chapel also has become known as “the fasting church.” In 2007, Franklin wrote *Fasting*, one of his many best-selling books.

“When I feel myself losing the edge, when I feel myself becoming mechanical in routine, especially in my preaching, I fast,” he said. “I think it’s so important for ministers to know that what people want more out of us on Sunday—they don’t want what’s in our outline—they want what’s in our heart. Head talks the head, but heart talks the heart.”

Franklin sometimes fasts from sunup to sundown.

“It’s my private preparation that determines my public success,” he said. “There’s something about seeking God those ways that it can really take you up a notch or two even in your passion for God and your passion for your sermon.”

His congregation engages in a corporate fast starting each January.

“Fasting is disconnecting with the world and reconnecting with God,” he said. “And it’s good when you can say in your church, we’re going to disconnect some from the world. I challenge young people to fast social media, fast sugar. We have all kinds of fasts going. But the whole church is on a journey for 21 days.”

Along with fasting and special nights of prayer, Franklin says worship also changes during this time.

“The worship goes to another level because there’s something about when you fast, it brings clarity,” he said. “It brings a reconnecting back to God, and that’s been the greatest benefit for us.”

Dreaming Big for God

Members of the Free Chapel staff speak highly of Franklin and his visionary leadership.

“I’ve had the privilege of watching pastor Franklin face many obstacles and opportunities with great faith, humility and character,” said Tracy Page, executive pastor. “Pastor is as passionate about his private worship as he is about his public ministry. He has instilled in our team, and even our whole congregation, an enormous capacity to dream big for God. We all carry his vision for reaching the next generation and evangelizing the world. Pastor and Cherise model courage and commitment that create a contagious passion for Jesus and an extraordinary dependence on the Holy Spirit. ... Our entire team is grateful to be a part of such a relevant and important vision.”

Bryan Woodson has served at Free Chapel for nearly a decade in a variety of roles from student ministry to campus pastor. He sees Franklin as “a man of great courage, godly wisdom and sincere faith.”

As marketing and communications director at Free Chapel, Jason Vernon has experienced “extreme kindness and love” from Franklin toward his family. “He has always been a wonderful example of a caring leader who displays impeccable character and a desire to serve others,” Vernon said.

Franklin knows it’s God who has granted this success. He said he is “more shocked than anybody” about it.

“I never in my wildest dreams imagined that I would have the opportunity to get to do what I do,” he said. “We must never forget that it’s God. It’s all God. He gets all the glory. And He’s looking for people right now that He can use in amazing ways. So dream big. Go for it and don’t limit God.” {eoa}

Christine D. Johnson is editor of Ministry Today. She invites your comments on this issue at @.