

Soak the Altar

When our graphic artist, Brenda, was designing this issue of the magazine, she collected several photographs of AIDS-infected South African children, including the one of the girl who appears on page 36. The hollow expression on that little child's face haunted Brenda for days, especially after she read our report on a ministry that places AIDS orphans in homes.

When I walked into Brenda's office one morning she was crying. I didn't need to ask why. The article on South Africa was on her desk, and the image of that frail youngster was on her computer screen. Brenda wiped her face apologetically and said, "This is hard."

Brenda wasn't crying simply because she pitied a sick, motherless child. She felt the compassion of God. It prompted not only tears but also convulsive waves of intercession. It's what the Bible calls a burden.

Many people in the Bible received burdens from God. Hannah was so agitated by her barrenness—and by the spiritual barrenness of her nation—that her intercession sounded like a drunken clamor. Jeremiah wept for backslidden Israel so much that he compared his eyes to fountains (see Jer. 9:1). God told Ezekiel to raise his voice in loud lamentation.

In the New Testament era, the apostle Paul was so gripped by a God-birthed concern for the unconverted that he felt he was under divine compulsion to preach. Paul was also known for soaking his

message in tears (see Acts 20:18-19). At times his praying was so intense that he compared it to the pangs of childbirth.

When was the last time you heard a preacher weep? Are we now so sophisticated that the Holy Spirit can't cry through us? In this age of PowerPoint, teleprompters and wireless microphones, I fear we've lost touch with God's emotions. Travail is no longer in style.

A hundred years ago a young Welsh coal miner named Evan Roberts was gripped by the realization that his countrymen were going to hell. In his words, he was "bent" by God's holy burden. With heaven-sent compassion he prayed that God would shut hell's gates for one year. His prayer triggered a revival that produced more than 100,000 conversions.

I wonder what would happen if in 2004 we got so painfully close to God that we felt His compassion for people who are trapped in sin and deception. What would happen if God laid a burden on you for the world's Muslims? What if you could feel His heart for drug addicts in your city? What if you could actually see the throngs of people who slip into the mouth of hell every day?

During the Welsh Revival of 1904, God aroused Christians from their self-

centeredness and gave them supernatural concern for the lost. But first He sent a weeping prophet to break up the fallow ground. That is God's pattern: Before the fire of God falls, Elijah's altar is first soaked with water.

I believe tears are on God's agenda for us in this new year. We need wet carpet in our churches—and the sound of travail.

The Lord wants to break our hearts and pour His God-sized love inside.

But we must prepare for the consequences: If we receive His burden it will interrupt our Sunday routines, mess up our priorities and upset the folks who like their altars tidy and dry. But it also will kindle in us fresh zeal and genuine compassion for those who don't know Jesus.