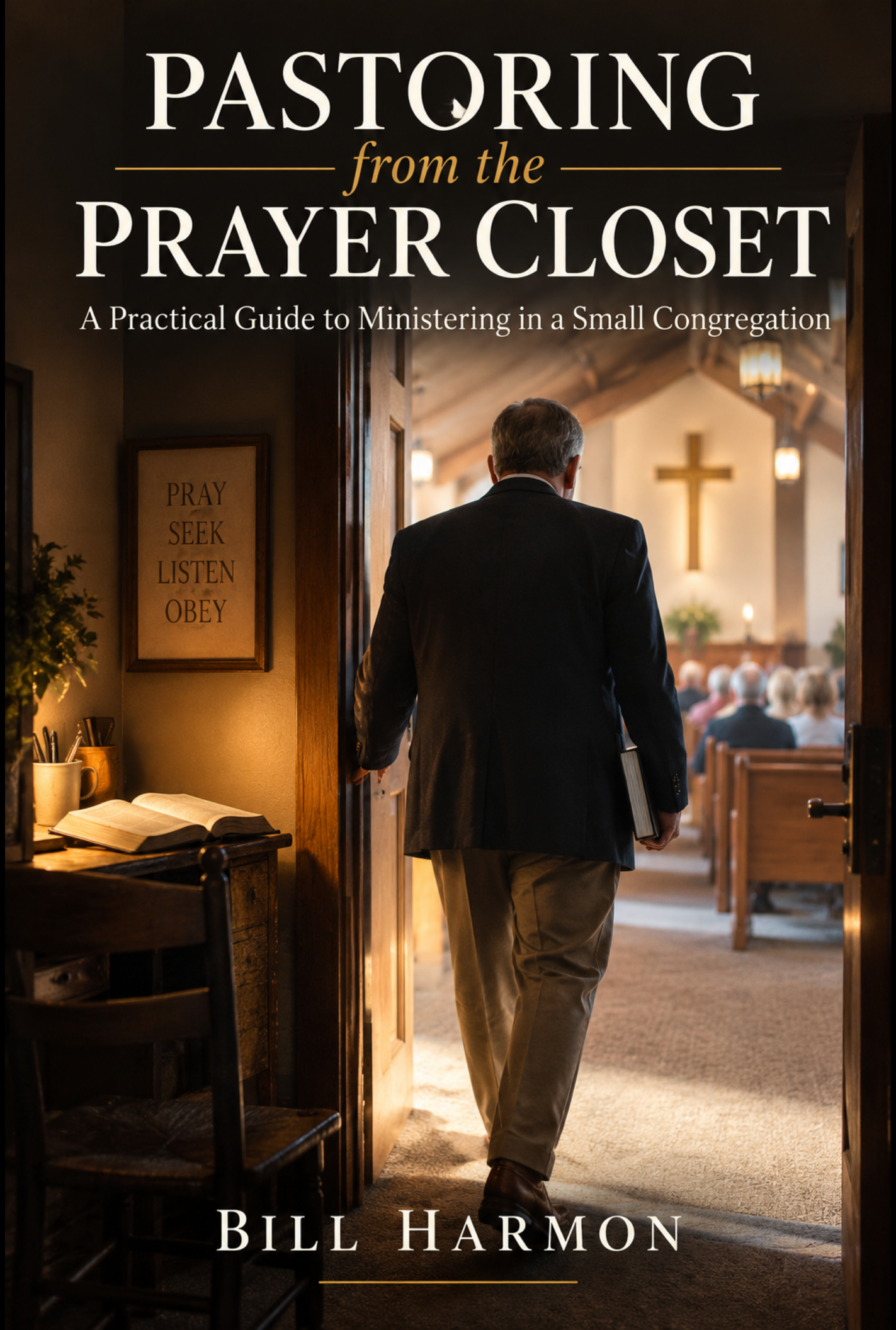
PASTORING *from the* PRAYER CLOSET

A Practical Guide to Ministering in a Small Congregation



BILL HARMON

BOOK AT A GLANCE

Prayer • People • Leadership • Proclamation

PART ONE • THE PASTOR IN THE PRAYER CLOSET

1 The Priest Before the Pastor

2 Praying Through the Directory

3 What Your People Have a Right to Expect

4 The Ministry of Showing Up

5 The Ministry of Staying

PART TWO • LEADING FROM THE PRAYER CLOSET

6 Give Them a Word

7 You Can't Do Everything

8 Trust Your People

9 Programs Are Tools, Not the Mission

PART THREE • PREACHING FROM THE PRAYER CLOSET

10 What Am I Supposed to Preach?

11 Preach to the People in Front of You

12 Preaching When Life Gets Real

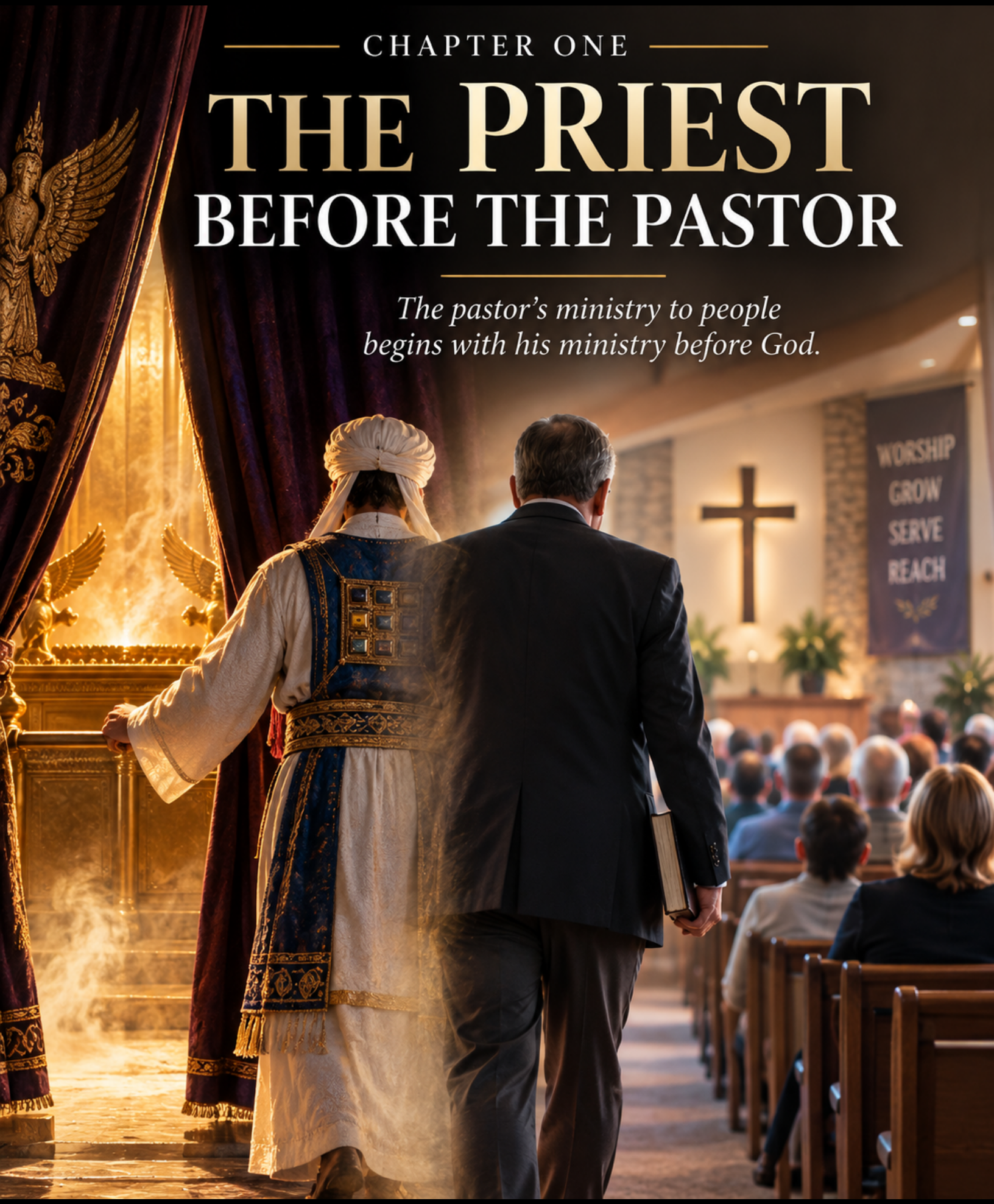
FINAL CHAPTER

13 Finish Well

CHAPTER ONE

THE PRIEST BEFORE THE PASTOR

The pastor's ministry to people begins with his ministry before God.



Chapter 1

The Priest Before the Pastor

The idea behind *Pastoring from the Prayer Closet* actually began before I became a pastor.

During my final year of seminary, I was required to write a philosophy of ministry. Like most seminarians, I was trying to put into words what I believed a pastor was supposed to be and do.

I built my paper around a fairly familiar understanding of pastoral ministry. The pastor serves as **priest, prophet, king, and shepherd**.

As prophet, the pastor speaks the Word of God to the people.

As king, the pastor provides leadership, administration, and direction for the church.

As shepherd, the pastor loves, cares for, protects, and walks alongside the people God has entrusted to him.

And as priest, the pastor brings the people before God.

All four roles are important. Nearly three decades of pastoral ministry have only convinced me of that more.

But while I was writing that paper, something became increasingly clear to me.

The priest had to come first.

Not because prayer is the only responsibility of a pastor. Far from it. Sermons have to be prepared. Decisions have to be made. People have to be visited. Meetings have to be conducted. Conflicts have to be addressed. Funerals have to be preached. Ministries have to be organized. People need counsel, encouragement, correction, and sometimes just somebody to sit beside them.

But I began to believe that if I failed as the priest—if I failed to bring my people before God—eventually I would become less effective as the prophet, king, and shepherd.

Then I began looking at Jesus.

Jesus preached.

Jesus taught.

Jesus healed.

Jesus led His disciples.

Jesus confronted religious leaders.

Jesus ministered to crowds that sometimes numbered in the thousands.

Yet repeatedly in the Gospels, Jesus withdrew from all of it to pray.

Sometimes He prayed early in the morning. Sometimes He prayed through the night. Sometimes He withdrew to a lonely place. Before major decisions, He prayed. In moments of great pressure, He prayed. Before the cross, He prayed.

Jesus never seemed to view prayer as something that competed with ministry.

Prayer was what energized His ministry.

That realization affected me deeply.

If Jesus Christ, the Son of God, regularly withdrew from people in order to spend time with the Father, what made me think I could pastor people without doing the same?

And Jesus' priestly ministry did not end when He ascended into heaven. Scripture tells us that even now He intercedes for us.

I love that thought.

Jesus is praying for His people.

That means when a pastor gets on his knees and begins bringing the names and needs of his congregation before God, he is doing something remarkably close to the heart and present ministry of Jesus.

That became the foundation of my philosophy of ministry.

The Prayer Closet Comes First

Over the years, I have come to think of the different responsibilities of pastoral ministry as being connected to the prayer closet.

I preach—but my preaching needs to come from the prayer closet.

I lead—but my leadership needs to come from the prayer closet.

I visit—but my shepherding needs to come from the prayer closet.

I make decisions—but those decisions need to come from the prayer closet.

I cast vision for the church—but that vision needs to come from the prayer closet.

The prayer closet does not replace those responsibilities.

It energizes them.

That distinction matters.

I have known pastors who were wonderful preachers. I have known pastors who were gifted administrators. Some were natural leaders. Others had extraordinary people skills. God uses all of those gifts.

But pastoral ministry cannot ultimately be sustained by personality, organizational ability, preaching talent, or leadership skill.

Eventually you will preach a sermon that doesn't work.

Eventually you will face a problem you cannot solve.

Eventually someone will ask you a question you cannot answer.

Eventually you will encounter a situation that isn't covered in any seminary textbook.

Eventually you will have to pastor someone you don't particularly like.

And eventually you will discover that you cannot produce in people what only God can produce.

That is when the priestly role of the pastor becomes more than a theological idea.

It becomes survival.

Bringing People Before God

I eventually began putting this philosophy into a very simple practice.

I prayed through the church directory.

There was nothing sophisticated about it. I had names. I had faces. And I had a God who knew far more about those people than I ever would.

So I began bringing them to Him.

One family at a time.

One name at a time.

Sometimes I knew exactly what to pray. I knew someone was facing surgery. I knew a marriage was struggling. I knew somebody had lost a job. I knew a teenager was making some difficult decisions.

Other times, I didn't know what they needed.

So I simply prayed.

“Lord, minister to them.”

And something began happening that I had not anticipated.

God began ministering to the pastor while the pastor was praying for the people.

A name would stop me.

You need to call them.

Another face would catch my attention.

You haven't seen them lately.

Someone else would come to mind.

They need encouragement.

Sometimes a sermon began forming.

Sometimes I became aware of a problem.

Sometimes an idea for ministry surfaced.

Sometimes I realized I had been irritated with somebody I was supposed to be loving.

And sometimes nothing happened at all.

I just prayed for them.

But slowly I discovered that my prayer closet was becoming the place where much of my pastoral ministry began.

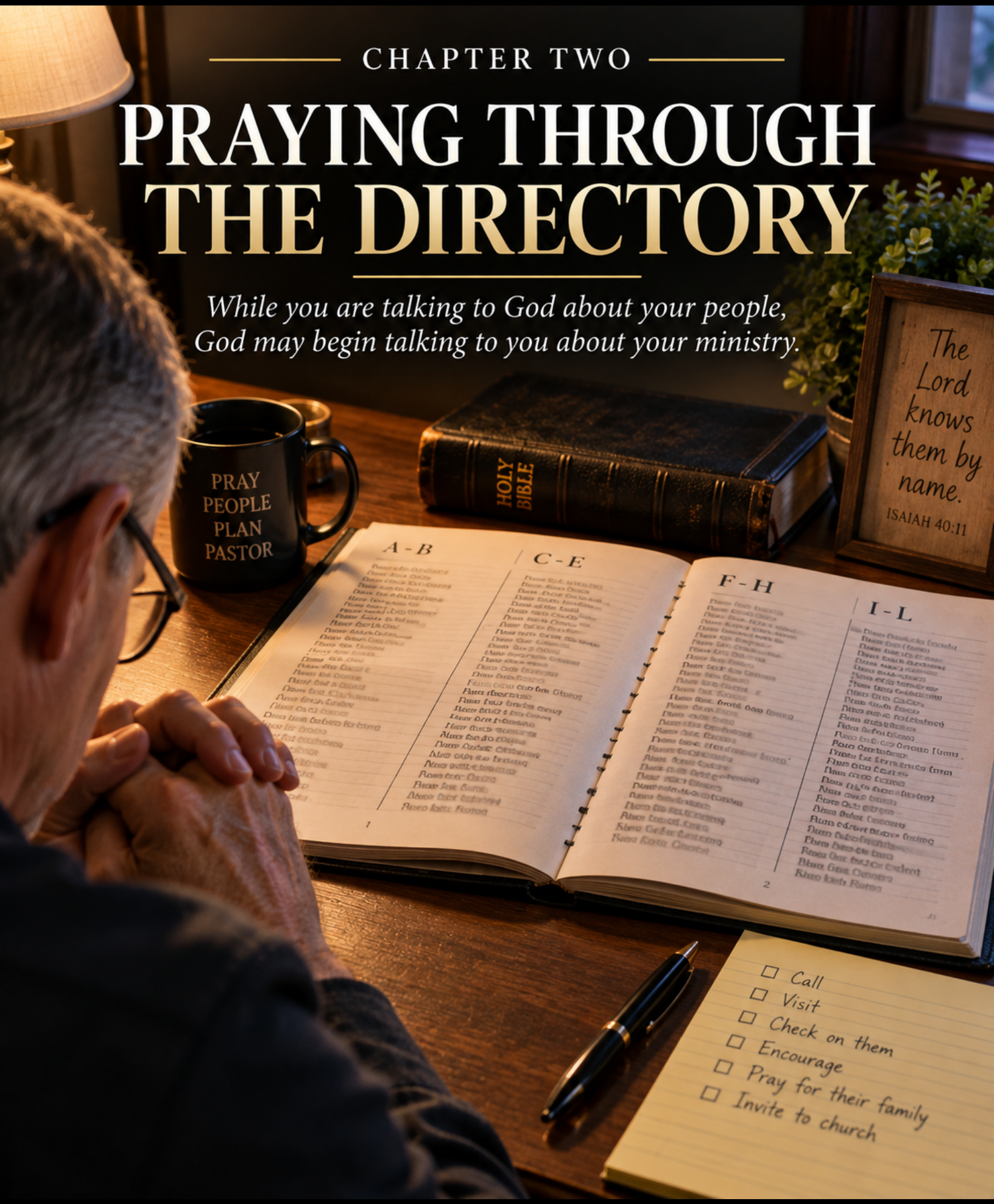
The priest was energizing the prophet.

The priest was directing the king.

The priest was softening the shepherd.

And without realizing it at the time, I was learning how to pastor from the prayer closet.

Nearly three decades later, I still don't know a better place to begin.


CHAPTER TWO
PRAYING THROUGH THE DIRECTORY
While you are talking to God about your people, God may begin talking to you about your ministry.
PRAY PEOPLE PLAN PASTOR
HOLY BIBLE
A - B
C - E
F - H
I - L
The Lord knows them by name.
ISAIAH 40:11
Call
Visit
Check on them
Encourage
Pray for their family
Invite to church

Chapter 2

Praying Through the Directory

There will always be more ministry than there is time to do ministry.

I learned that pretty quickly.

There is always another person who could use a phone call. Another family you could visit. Another sermon you could work on. Another ministry that needs attention. Another person you could invite to church. Another problem you could try to solve.

A pastor's work is never really finished.

You just eventually go to bed.

One of the greatest gifts the prayer closet has given me over nearly thirty years of ministry is balance. I don't have to do everything. But I sure try to do what God impresses upon me to do while I pray.

That practice began for me on day one.

Just Pray for Me

While I was a seminarian, I attended a large church. Life was pretty good for me at the time. I was in school preparing for ministry. I was already involved in ministry. I wasn't looking for the pastor to solve all my problems.

There was really only one thing I wanted from my pastor.

I wanted to know he was praying for me.

That was enough.

Just pray for me regularly.

Somewhere along the way, I began thinking that maybe other people felt the same way. Maybe they didn't need their pastor constantly checking on them. Maybe they didn't need me involved in every detail of their lives.

But perhaps it would mean something to them to know that their pastor regularly brought their name before God.

So when I became a pastor, I started praying through the church directory.

I have been doing it ever since.

A to Z, Then Z to A

I'm an early riser. Morning is when I am at my best.

I joke that I shouldn't be held accountable for anything I say after 9:00 at night.

So my most important spiritual work happens early.

Normally, after my personal devotional time on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I pray through our church directory. If something interrupts that schedule, I'll move it to Tuesday or Thursday. There have been seasons when I haven't managed three times a week, but throughout my ministry I have normally prayed through it at least twice.

Today our directory contains a little over 150 families. That includes members, regular attenders, new guests, prospects, and acquaintances with whom God has given us some connection.

It takes me about forty-five minutes to pray through the whole thing.

On Mondays and Fridays, I pray from A to Z.

On Wednesdays, I start at Z and work toward A.

I suppose I do that because I feel sorry for the people whose last names begin with Z. They ought to get to be first occasionally.

There isn't anything magical about my system.

The important thing isn't whether you pray A to Z or Z to A. The important thing is that you pray.

What Do You Pray for 150 Families?

My prayers aren't the same for everybody.

Obviously, I pray for physical needs. If someone is sick, facing surgery, battling cancer, or dealing with some other health problem, I bring that need before the Lord.

But I don't want my prayer list to become merely a medical report.

I am their pastor.

So I pray especially for their souls.

Sometimes I ask God to give someone a **God moment** during the day—some moment when they unexpectedly become aware of Him.

Sometimes I ask God to interrupt them.

Sometimes I pray that He will become the first priority in their lives.

Sometimes I ask for a spiritual encounter with God that will consume them.

For someone who doesn't know Christ, I often pray:

“Lord, send somebody who can speak their language.”

I may not be that person. They may not listen to a preacher. They may not listen to me. But somewhere there is someone whose story, personality, experience, or relationship can get through to them.

Send that person, Lord.

On occasion my prayer becomes even more desperate:

“Do whatever it takes to reach them.”

Other prayers are very specific.

A marriage is struggling.

A child is rebelling.

Someone is facing financial problems.

A family is grieving.

Someone has wandered away from the church.

So I bring what I know before the One who knows what I don't know.

And sometimes I don't know what to pray at all.

I just say their name.

God knows.

Keep a Piece of Paper Beside You

Something started happening as I prayed through the directory.

People would come to mind.

Not merely their name—I was already looking at their name—but an impression that I needed to do something.

Call him.

Check on her.

You haven't seen them lately.

Send them a text.

Have lunch with him.

I believe those impressions often come from the Holy Spirit.

I don't know that I can give you a formula for determining when an impression is from God. After all these years, I know myself fairly well, and I think I have learned something about recognizing the Spirit's voice.

It is similar to sermon preparation.

There are times when I'm working on a sermon and suddenly I just know, *This is what the Lord wants me to say.*

The same thing happens when I pray for my people.

I rarely act on those impressions immediately. For one thing, it is usually early in the morning, and most people don't want a phone call from their pastor before sunrise.

Before computers became such a part of our lives, I kept a piece of paper beside me.

That piece of paper became my to-do list for the week.

Every time I prayed through the directory, if I felt impressed to do something, I wrote it down.

Call this person.

Visit that person.

Check on this family.

Take someone to lunch.

Follow up on that situation.

By the time I finished praying, I had more than a prayer list.

I had a pastoral agenda.

Let God Make the To-Do List

This may be one of the most important things I have learned about ministry.

Instead of making my ministry list and asking God to bless it, I try to let my ministry list come out of my time with God.

That doesn't mean I ignore my other responsibilities.

The sermon still has to be prepared.

The staff still needs leadership.

Meetings still happen.

Emails still need answers.

Administration doesn't disappear because the pastor prayed that morning.

But alongside those regular responsibilities is a list of people and situations that were impressed upon me while I prayed.

My goal each week is to get those things done.

Do I?

Honestly, no.

Normally I don't get everything done.

Some things get carried over to the next week's list.

And that's okay.

Because pastoring from the prayer closet has never meant that I finish everything.

It means I have some confidence about what I should do next.

Burdened, but Not Overwhelmed

Looking back, I think this practice has saved me from a lot of the anxiety that can come with pastoral ministry.

I've been pastoring for twenty-nine years, and there have been very few sleepless nights because of the church.

That doesn't mean ministry has always been easy.

It hasn't.

My wife, Kristi, and I once attended a retreat for pastors and spouses. We listened as other ministers told horrible stories about church conflict, burnout, and painful situations they had endured.

When it came to us, we almost felt guilty.

All we could say was:

“It's all good.”

I love my life.

I love my church.

That doesn't mean we haven't experienced heartache.

When our son was diagnosed with autism, it was horrible.

When church attendance dropped significantly, I cried out to the Lord. I cried out to other people too.

There have been painful seasons.

But I think there is an important difference between being **burdened and overwhelmed**.

I have been burdened.

I just haven't often been overwhelmed.

I have been confused.

But I haven't been lost.

Time with the Lord solves a lot of problems.

He is a great Counselor.

I think I read that somewhere.

Sometimes You Find Out Why

Recently, I had been praying for a man going through a terrible family situation. His wife had accused him of abusing his children.

I prayed for him.

I prayed for justice.

And on a number of occasions while praying, I felt that familiar nudge.

Call him.

Text him.

Have lunch with him.

So I tried to do those things.

Today, while I was working on this chapter, I received a text from him.

The judge had ruled in his favor.

Evidence had come to light indicating that his wife had encouraged the children to make terrible accusations against their father.

For him, it was a moment of tremendous relief and celebration.

I don't pretend that my prayers caused the judge's ruling. And I certainly don't believe that every difficult situation ends with such a clear resolution.

But I am grateful that while he was walking through one of the darkest experiences of his life, his name kept appearing in my prayer closet.

And because his name appeared in my prayer closet, it also appeared on my pastoral to-do list.

That's pastoring from the prayer closet.

Pray for the Difficult Ones Too

There is one other benefit to praying through the directory that I didn't anticipate when I started.

It changes how you feel about people.

Every church has difficult people.

If yours doesn't, you may want to check again.

There are people who complain. People who misunderstand you. People who say things they shouldn't say. People who can make a pastor's life unnecessarily difficult.

But it is hard to stay angry with someone whose name you regularly bring before God.

Prayer softens your heart.

And sometimes, while praying for a difficult person, God helps me see something I hadn't considered.

There may be an explanation for why they behave the way they do.

An explanation isn't an excuse.

Wrong behavior is still wrong.

But explanations are nice to remember.

Perhaps they're afraid.

Perhaps they've been hurt.

Perhaps something is happening at home that I don't know about.

Perhaps their anger isn't really about me at all.

Perhaps they're carrying something I cannot see.

When I pray for them, God doesn't always change them.

Sometimes He changes their pastor.

Start With the Names

I don't know what your system will look like.

Maybe your church has a printed directory. Maybe everything is digital. Maybe you pastor fifty people and can write every name on a few sheets of paper.

It doesn't matter.

Get the names.

Get somewhere quiet.

And start praying.

You don't need a complicated prayer.

You don't need to know everybody's problems.

You don't even need to know what to say every time.

Just bring your people before God.

And keep something nearby to write on.

Because you may discover what I discovered.

While you are talking to God about your people, God may begin talking to you about your ministry.

There will still be more to do than you have time to do.

That's pastoral ministry.

But you don't have to do everything.

Just try to do what God puts on your heart while you're in the prayer closet.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT DO YOUR PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO EXPECT?



Our pastor was godly. He knew God.
And he prayed for us.

Chapter 3

What Your People Have a Right to Expect

What does a congregation have a right to expect from its pastor?

That's an interesting question.

They probably don't have a right to expect a great preacher.

Some of us are better at preaching than others.

They don't have a right to expect a brilliant administrator. They can't expect their pastor to have the answer to every problem, grow the church every year, never make a bad decision, or remember everybody's birthday.

But after nearly thirty years of pastoral ministry, there are some things I believe a congregation has every right to expect from me.

The first is pretty simple.

They have a right to expect me to be godly.

Knowing God Ought to Do Something to Us

By godly, I don't mean weird.

I don't mean someone who walks around looking miserable and talking in a different voice because he is a preacher.

And I certainly don't mean someone who thinks he is better than everybody else.

Actually, I think genuine godliness produces almost the opposite.

When people really know God, it does something to them.

They become joyful people.

They become positive people.

They love people.

They laugh.

They joke.

They don't take themselves too seriously.

Basically, when we really know God, He makes us better people.

People others want to be around.

I get that primarily from Jesus.

Jesus was fully God, but He also became fully human. He experienced hunger, exhaustion, disappointment, grief, temptation, friendship, rejection, and pain. And throughout His earthly ministry, He lived in continual dependence upon His Father and the Holy Spirit.

And look at the person He was.

People wanted to be around Him.

Children came to Him.

Sinners ate with Him.

His disciples traveled with Him for years.

I have a hard time believing that Jesus never laughed with those disciples.

Actually, I think He probably laughed a lot.

I've noticed something similar in the godliest people I have known.

They laugh.

Maybe it's because they don't feel the need to control everything.

Maybe when you really believe God is God, you can quit trying to be.

The Pastor Who Taught Me Godliness

One of the people who taught me this was the first senior pastor I served under.

When I graduated from seminary, shockingly to me—but probably not to anybody else—no district superintendent seemed eager to hand me a church.

So in 1994, I felt God leading me to become a youth pastor at Fort Mill Church of the Nazarene under Rev. Harry Widener.

Rev. Widener and I were different.

Very different.

He was an extremely conservative pastor. He didn't believe Christians should buy things on Sunday or eat at restaurants on Sunday. He didn't allow shorts to be worn in the church gym or on church trips.

Then here I came.

I was probably, in his mind, this crazy liberal coming out of seminary.

He had been called into ministry later in life. Instead of seminary, he went through a course of ministry and was mentored by other pastors.

We had different backgrounds.

Different educations.

Different convictions.

But from the first time we met, we hit it off.

Why?

Because Harry Widener knew God.

You could tell.

He loved the Lord. He talked to Him regularly. He loved people. He was fun to be around.

And he was an amazing personal evangelist.

He could talk to a salesperson, a stranger, or just about anybody he encountered and somehow turn the conversation toward Jesus without making it seem forced.

I watched him.

I learned from him.

And something interesting happened about three months after I arrived.

Rev. Widener dropped the rule about wearing shorts.

People asked me, “How did you change him?”

I didn't.

The Lord must have done it.

That's another thing about people who really know God.

They can change.

The Closer You Get to God

Godliness also produces humility.

I don't know how someone can spend significant time in the presence of God and come away thinking he is better than everybody else.

Isaiah certainly didn't.

When Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up, his response wasn't:

“Finally, somebody recognizes how spiritual I am.”

It was:

“Woe to me!... I am a man of unclean lips.”

The closer Isaiah got to God's holiness, the more aware he became of his own need.

Pastors should be humble people.

Nothing poisons our witness much faster than arrogance.

We stand behind pulpits every week telling people about grace. Surely we ought to be among the first to recognize how desperately we need it ourselves.

That means pastors need to be able to say:

“I was wrong.”

“I don't know.”

“I made a mistake.”

And sometimes:

“I'm sorry.”

A couple of Easters ago, I was putting chairs out on our front lawn.

There was a man in our congregation who had grown up in a very difficult home. God had been amazingly gracious to him, and I had watched him grow tremendously. But he still occasionally said things that were silly or inappropriate.

I was doing the work while he sat in his car.

After I had finished putting out all the chairs, he finally got out and jokingly said something like:

“I waited until you got all the chairs out before I came up.”

Without missing a beat, I responded:

“That's exactly what I thought you would say!”

The moment those words came out of my mouth, I knew they were wrong.

Maybe there was truth behind them.

That didn't make them right.

Later, I apologized.

Pastors are going to make mistakes.

The issue isn't whether we will make them.

The issue is whether we are humble enough to admit them.

Don't Let Anybody Outwork You

There is something else I believe a congregation has a right to expect from its pastor.

They have a right to expect us to work hard.

I probably learned some of that on a basketball court.

My high school basketball coach was Rick Hopkins. He was a disciple of the Bobby Knight philosophy of coaching.

Coach Hopkins expected perfection.

We also knew he cared about us.

And he drilled something into us:

Don't ever let another team outwork us.

They may shoot better than us.

They may defend better than us.

They may have more talent.

But don't let them outhustle us.

I'm a pretty competitive person, so it probably isn't surprising that some of my basketball philosophy followed me into ministry.

I've always felt the same way about pastoring.

Someone may preach better than me.

Someone may be a better administrator.

Someone may be more charismatic.

Someone may pastor a larger church.

That's okay.

But I don't want somebody to care more or work harder for their people than I do for mine.

It Doesn't Feel Like Work

The funny thing is that I don't really think of ministry as work.

I tell people that I haven't worked since I left my bank job while I was in seminary.

I get to do what I love.

I get to pastor people.

When you love God and love people, working hard for them isn't particularly difficult.

Parenting is the same way.

I love my children.

Was it technically work to stay awake with them when they were sick?

Probably.

Was it work to drive them to school?

I suppose.

But I didn't wake up thinking, *I can't believe I have to work for these children again today.*

They're my kids.

I love them.

That's how I feel about the church.

I love these people.

So visiting someone in the hospital isn't punching a time clock.

Preparing a sermon isn't completing an assignment.

Calling somebody who is hurting isn't an interruption to my real job.

That is my real job.

I get to pastor these people.

Pastor Your Family First

There is a danger here.

“Don't let anybody outwork you” can become a terrible philosophy if it means sacrificing your marriage and children on the altar of the church.

No pastor should do that.

Your first congregation lives in your house.

I believe one reason the prayer closet has helped me maintain balance is that I pray for my family before I ever get to the church directory.

If I'm honestly interceding for my wife and children before God, I have to believe the Holy Spirit is capable of saying:

They need you today.

The same Spirit who tells me to call a church member can tell me to go home.

The same Spirit who tells me someone needs a visit can remind me that my daughter has a cross-country meet.

There were times when church responsibilities and family responsibilities collided.

Sometimes I missed things because of church.

Other times, we just got creative.

I remember driving the church van to my daughters' cross-country meets. I could watch them run, leave the meet, pick up kids, and get everybody back to church for Wednesday night.

Was that the most efficient way to do ministry?

Probably not.

But I got to be Dad and Pastor Bill on the same afternoon.

I don't particularly like vacations.

I take them because Kristi likes them.

That's probably reason enough.

I also know something every pastor needs to know:

The church can survive without me.

That's an important discovery.

Jesus is the Savior of the church.

I'm the pastor.

Those are very different job descriptions.

The Gift of a Godly Spouse

I have also been incredibly blessed in Kristi.

She is completely sold out to God.

She loves Him deeply, and she loves serving other people.

I joke that I've been riding her coattails for quite a while.

But there is truth behind the joke.

A pastor's spouse doesn't have to fulfill some artificial list of expectations created by the congregation. Kristi isn't godly because she married a pastor.

She loves God because she knows God.

And sharing life with someone who wants God as much as you do makes an enormous difference.

We have been able to love the church together without believing the church owns our family.

What I Hope They Say

Someday I won't be the pastor of West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene.

Someone else will stand behind that pulpit.

Someone else will visit those hospitals.

Someone else will pray over those families.

Someone else will probably move something I said should never be moved.

And eventually people will summarize my ministry.

They may remember some sermons.

I hope they remember a few.

They may remember some things we accomplished.

They may remember some funny stories.

But if I could choose what they say about me after all these years, I think I know what I would want it to be.

“Our pastor was godly. He knew God. And he prayed for us.”

That would be enough.

Actually, that would be more than enough.


CHAPTER FOUR
THE MINISTRY OF SHOWING UP
At the Game
At the Hospital
At the Milestones
PRAY
LISTEN
CARE
SHOW UP
LOVE
Get Well Soon
Most people will not remember what their pastor said when their world fell apart. But they will remember that their pastor was there.

Chapter 4

The Ministry of Showing Up

Presence is everything.

That's probably an unusual statement coming from an introvert.

I am naturally introverted. I'm a little socially awkward. I'm not always the best conversationalist.

And I am quite comfortable with silence.

That last one has actually turned out to be pretty useful in pastoral ministry.

Because sometimes there isn't anything to say.

Sometimes the best thing a pastor can do is show up.

When They're in the Hospital, Go

My philosophy about hospital visitation is pretty simple.

If someone from my congregation is in the hospital, I visit them.

If they're in a regular room, my general practice is to visit about every other day, normally excluding weekends. If they're in ICU, I try to visit every day.

If they're having surgery, I try to be there.

I want to pray with them before the surgery, and I want to spend some time with the family while the procedure is taking place.

People appreciate it when their pastor shows up.

I have been told by people who work at our local hospital that I visit more than any other pastor.

I don't know whether that's really true.

But you already know my basketball philosophy.

I don't want to be outworked.

Besides, hospital waiting rooms have given me some of my best opportunities to get to know people.

You may sit beside someone at church for years and only have a two-minute conversation with them.

Sit together in a surgery waiting room for three hours and eventually you get past the weather.

You hear stories.

You learn about their family.

They tell you things about their fears, their marriage, their children, their past, and sometimes their faith.

Waiting isn't wasted time.

It's pastoral time.

Take Your Laptop

There is also a practical side to this.

Pastors have work to do.

If I know I'm going to be sitting in a waiting room for several hours while someone is having surgery, I normally take my laptop.

I can answer emails.

I can work on the newsletter.

I can prepare part of a sermon.

I can take care of administrative responsibilities.

That allows me to be present for the family without spending the entire time looking at the clock thinking about everything waiting for me back at the church.

You don't always have to choose between being productive and being present.

Sometimes you just need to take your laptop.

Pray in the Elevator

I have another little practice when I visit the hospital.

I pray in the elevator.

Not out loud.

That could make for an interesting ride.

But as I'm going up to someone's room, I whisper a prayer to God.

Usually nobody wants to talk in an elevator anyway, so it's a pretty good place to get my mind and spirit aligned with the Lord.

I ask Him to help me.

Give me the right words.

Help me recognize what is happening in that room.

Help me know when to speak.

Help me know when not to speak.

My friend Charlotte Sanders, a retired pastor's wife, used to say:

“I just shoot up prayers all day long.”

I have adopted that philosophy.

There are a lot of moments in pastoral ministry when you don't have time to go somewhere for thirty minutes of prayer.

So you shoot one up.

Lord, help me.

Lord, give me wisdom.

Lord, give me the words.

Lord, help me see what I need to see.

I've prayed a lot of those prayers in elevators.

Sit Down

A hospital chaplain once gave me a simple piece of advice that I have never forgotten.

He told me that sitting with someone for five minutes feels about the same as standing beside their bed for ten.

I think he was right.

When you stand, people sometimes feel like you're ready to leave.

When you sit, you're saying:

“I'm here.”

So whenever possible, I sit down.

I don't stay forever.

My normal hospital visit is probably twenty to thirty minutes at the most.

People in hospitals need rest, and ironically hospitals aren't always great places to get it. Nurses are coming in. Doctors are checking on them. Machines are making noise. Family members are visiting.

The pastor doesn't need to become one more person exhausting them.

Of course, you follow the Spirit's leading. There are times when twenty minutes becomes an hour because something important is happening.

But generally:

Show up.

Sit down.

Don't stay too long.

Bring the Word With You

I almost always read Scripture during a hospital visit.

Over the years I have discovered that people may not remember much of what I say.

But they often remember the Scripture.

That is especially beautiful with elderly people who are beginning to struggle with their memory.

I have sat beside people who couldn't remember names or details of their lives. Then I begin:

“The Lord is my shepherd…”

And suddenly they join me.

“I shall not want.”

The Twenty-third Psalm is still there.

Somewhere deep inside them, the Word remains.

That has taught me something.

Pastors sometimes put too much pressure on ourselves to say something profound.

We already brought something profound with us.

Open the Bible.

Let God speak.

Don't Say Something Just to Say Something

There are plenty of situations where I don't know what to say.

That's okay.

I've learned that it is better to say nothing than to say something that isn't helpful.

I try to stay away from clichés.

“Everything is going to be okay.”

I don't know that.

“God has a plan.”

That may be theologically true, but at the wrong moment it can sound terribly insensitive.

“I know how you feel.”

Usually I don't.

So I don't feel pressure to fill every silence.

Remember, I'm an introvert.

Silence and I are old friends.

Instead, I shoot up one of Charlotte's prayers.

Lord, if there is something I need to say, give it to me.

Until He does, I can sit there.

Presence doesn't require a speech.

Don't Fix It

I don't go into difficult situations trying to fix people.

I'm not very good at fixing things around the house either.

But fortunately, I have a Big Brother who is.

Jesus is pretty good at repairing broken things.

So my job isn't to have all the answers.

My job is to help people hear His voice.

When tragedy strikes, I often find that God gives me a calmness and a clear mind. I can see what is happening in the room and sometimes recognize what needs to happen next.

Experience helps.

There really is no substitute for it.

The more times you walk into rooms where people are grieving, the more you learn when to talk, when to be quiet, when to pray, when to read Scripture, and when everybody just needs a few minutes.

Sometimes after someone dies, I will ask the spouse:

"Would you like a few moments alone?"

If they say yes, I'll ask everyone else to step out.

Sometimes the pastor needs to become a buffer.

Families can become tense during tragedy. Emotions are high. People are exhausted. Old family problems can suddenly walk into the room along with everybody else.

I would rather somebody get mad at me than at the grieving husband or wife.

That's part of showing up too.

A Steak Biscuit and Salvation

Hospital rooms can also become holy places.

Years ago, I was visiting a man at the VA hospital.

As I often do, I asked:

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

He thought about it and said he would really like a steak biscuit from Hardee's.

I asked the obvious pastoral question:

“Are you allowed to have one?”

He assured me that he was.

So I went and got him a steak biscuit.

I brought it back to his room and handed it to him.

Before he took a bite, he looked at me and said:

“I need to get my heart right with God.”

Well, that changed the direction of the visit.

Before he ate his steak biscuit, that man accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

It was crazy.

And amazing.

I don't know that you'll find “Bring Steak Biscuits” in many books on evangelism.

But maybe it ought to be in one.

Sometimes loving somebody in a very ordinary way opens the door to an extraordinary conversation.

Show Up for the Good Stuff Too

Pastoral presence isn't only for hospitals and funerals.

I love going to ballgames.

I go to graduations.

I go to weddings.

I show up at other events in people's lives.

They're my people.

We're family.

I probably make an extra effort to attend games involving kids from single-parent homes.

Maybe that's because I know having another adult in the stands cheering for them can matter.

And honestly, I'm a former athlete.

I like watching the games.

Pastoral ministry doesn't have to happen inside a church building.

Sometimes it happens in bleachers.

You learn things about families sitting beside them at a ballgame that you would never learn shaking their hand after Sunday worship.

And they learn something about you too.

They learn that you don't just care whether they come to your church.

You care about their life.

Respect Their Privacy

Showing up doesn't mean barging in.

People have a right to privacy.

I normally ask people whether they want me to be present for their surgery.

Some do.

Some don't.

Respect the answer.

Since we hired Regina, our associate pastor, more of the ladies in the congregation have asked for her to come and pray with them.

I think that's wonderful.

I want Regina to be their pastor too.

Pastoral ministry doesn't become less successful when someone asks for another pastor.

That's not competition.

That's the Body of Christ doing what it is supposed to do.

The goal isn't for everybody to need me.

The goal is for everybody to be cared for.

When the Prayer Closet Sends You Somewhere

One of the most powerful examples of this happened with a man named Ray.

Ray was a really good guy who had been battling throat cancer. During that journey, he had put his faith in Jesus.

One day he was scheduled for what was supposed to be a simple procedure. They were going to put a scope down his throat and take a look.

Technically, it wasn't surgery.

Normally, I wouldn't have gone.

But that morning while I was praying, I felt an impression from the Lord:

Go to the hospital.

So I went.

I didn't make it in time to pray with Ray before the procedure, but his wife, Tonya, was there by herself.

I sat with her.

It was supposed to be simple.

Everything should be fine.

Except everything wasn't fine.

During the procedure, something went wrong.

Ray couldn't breathe.

They had to intubate him.

Suddenly Tonya and I were sitting in one of those little rooms where doctors take families when the news isn't what anyone expected.

She was devastated.

She was scared.

And I was thankful I was there.

Not because I had some profound theological explanation.

I didn't.

But I could make phone calls when she couldn't speak.

I could sit beside her.

I could pray.

I could be there.

Several months later, Ray still wasn't doing well.

I went to his hospital room one evening, and the family didn't expect him to make it through the night.

So I stayed.

Most of the night.

There wasn't much I could do.

There wasn't anything I could fix.

I was just there.

Ray didn't die that night. He lived about another week.

But his family never forgot that their pastor stayed with them through the night.

And I have never forgotten why I was there the first time everything went wrong.

The prayer closet sent me.

Just Show Up

Pastors sometimes worry too much about what they're going to say.

We want the perfect Scripture.

The perfect prayer.

The perfect explanation.

The perfect pastoral response.

After nearly thirty years, I think we make it more complicated than it needs to be.

Go.

Sit down.

Listen.

Read the Bible.

Pray.

Laugh when it is appropriate.

Be quiet when it isn't.

Stay when they need you.

Leave when they need rest.

Bring a steak biscuit every once in a while.

And when you don't know what to do, shoot up a prayer.

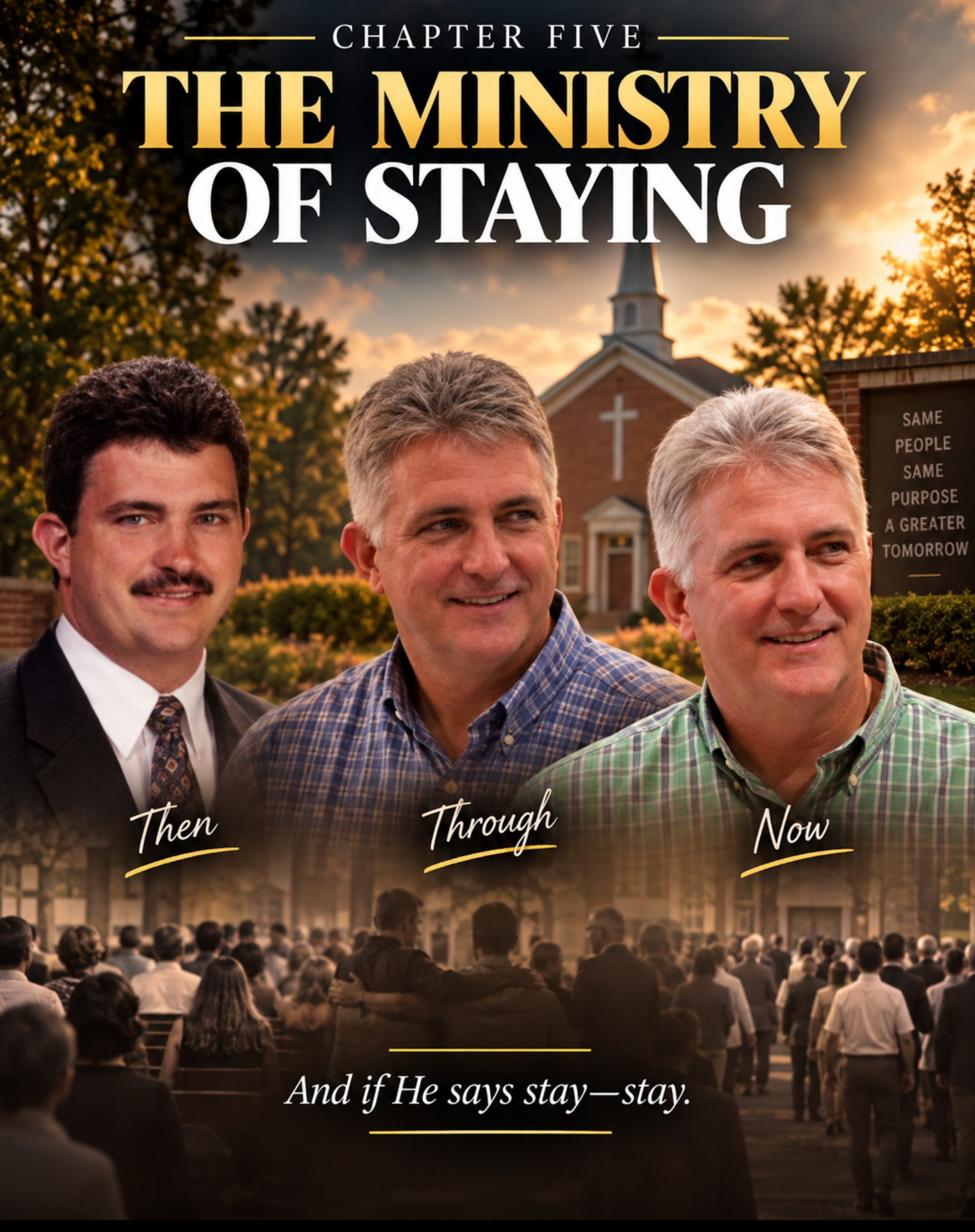
“Lord, help me love these people.”

Most people will not remember what their pastor said when their world fell apart.

But they will remember that their pastor was there.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MINISTRY OF STAYING



And if He says stay—stay.

Chapter 5

The Ministry of Staying

I have pastored the same church for nearly thirty years.

Whenever people hear that, they sometimes assume I must have discovered the secret to a long pastorate.

I have.

Apparently, the secret is to be good enough for your congregation but not good enough for the district superintendents.

That will keep you in one place for a while.

There is actually a little truth behind that joke.

I Didn't Have a Lot of Offers

When I first came to West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene, our district superintendent seemed to like me.

He appointed me to several district leadership positions. I served as the district adult ministries director, chaired our local zone of pastors, and served on the Board of Credentials.

One thing he seemed to appreciate about me was that I would tell him what I thought.

Even when it wasn't what everybody else thought.

Eventually, that got me in a little trouble.

As our district superintendent got older, I felt he had become tired and increasingly critical. I especially became concerned after talking with pastors of some of our smaller churches who felt they had been treated pretty harshly.

It bothered me.

So I did what every young pastor with an underdeveloped sense of self-preservation would do.

I told the district superintendent I thought it was time for him to retire.

That conversation went about as well as you would imagine.

He looked at me and said:

“You can't tell me that.”

I said something like:

“I know. But here's the way I see it. A pastor of a large church can't tell you because people will think he wants your job. A pastor of a small church can't tell you because he may need you to help him get his next church.”

Then I added:

“I don't care if I stay at West Columbia the rest of my life.”

Looking back, that may not have been the greatest career-development strategy.

I don't know what effect that conversation had on future opportunities, and I don't want to pretend that I do.

I do know that in nearly thirty years, I have had only one serious interview with another church, and that church was significantly smaller than the one I was already pastoring.

There were also a couple of times when I felt the Lord wanted me to send out some résumés.

I did.

Nothing happened.

And strangely enough, I was okay with that.

The Real Reason I Stayed

It would be easy to say I stayed because I didn't have anywhere else to go.

There may be a little truth in that.

But it isn't the real reason.

I stayed because I believed God wanted me to stay.

When I arrived at WCFN, I could already imagine being there for a long time.

My dream wasn't to pastor a megachurch.

Honestly, I'm not sure my personality would survive it.

My hope was to build a congregation of around 250 people and then begin starting other churches.

That dream didn't unfold exactly as I imagined.

Most ministry dreams don't.

But year after year, I continued to have a sense that there was more to do.

There were more people to reach.

There were ministries that hadn't happened yet.

There were changes that still needed to be made.

There was another vision of what the church might become.

As long as God continued giving me a vision for the future of the church, it was difficult for me to believe my work there was finished.

Don't Resign on Monday

There have absolutely been times when I wondered whether my ministry at WCFN was over.

There were difficult seasons.

There were years when attendance declined.

There were conflicts.

There were Sundays when things didn't go well.

There were moments when I cried out to God because I really wondered whether I had anything left to offer the church.

But God has a way of affirming us.

He also has a way of giving us another glimpse of the future.

That is one reason I would caution a young pastor against making a major decision because of one terrible week.

Don't resign because somebody got mad.

Don't resign because the board meeting went badly.

Don't resign because attendance was terrible Sunday.

Don't resign because somebody criticized your sermon.

And definitely don't resign on Monday morning.

If God is calling you somewhere else, He doesn't have to panic you into it.

I believe God confirms those things over time.

There should be a growing conviction in your spirit.

There should be a peace that remains through the process.

A couple of years ago, I became convinced God was calling me toward evangelism. As I walked through that possibility, the Lord continued to give me assurance that I was hearing Him correctly.

That taught me something.

The peace of God can remain even when we don't particularly like the plan.

So staying isn't always faithful.

And leaving isn't always unfaithful.

The question is the same one we have been asking throughout this book:

What is God saying in the prayer closet?

Leave It Better Than You Found It

I have always had another conviction about leaving a church.

I want to leave it better than I found it.

That doesn't mean bigger.

Bigger and better aren't always the same thing.

I mean healthier.

Stronger.

More capable of continuing its ministry.

More prepared for whoever comes next.

There may come a day when God tells me my work at WCFN is finished.

If that day comes, I hope I can walk away knowing I didn't simply use the church as a place to build my résumé.

These are people, not stepping-stones.

I want the next pastor to inherit something I loved.

Longevity Puts Credit in the Bank

There are some things you simply cannot have after two years of ministry.

You can't manufacture history.

After you've been somewhere long enough, you know people's stories.

You remember when their children were born.

You know what their marriage has survived.

You remember the cancer diagnosis.

You sat in the hospital waiting room.

You buried Mom.

You prayed when their teenager was struggling.

You celebrated when the prodigal came home.

You watched their children become adults.

And they know your story too.

They've watched you.

They know your family.

They've seen you have good Sundays and bad Sundays.

They've heard good sermons and probably endured a few others.

Over time, all of that puts a little credit in the bank.

That credit matters when you have to have a difficult conversation.

A pastor who has been there six months may say something completely true and still not be heard.

After twenty years, you may be able to say the same thing because the person knows your heart.

They may disagree with you.

They may even be angry.

But underneath the disagreement is a history that says:

“I know this man loves me.”

Longevity doesn't give you the right to be harsh.

It gives you the opportunity to be trusted.

When Family Leaves

Of course, staying in one place also means watching a lot of people leave.

After nearly thirty years, there are people who were once vital parts of our ministry who no longer attend WCFN.

That hurts.

Sometimes it feels like losing a family member.

I've had young people grow up in our church, leave for college, come home, and decide they prefer a more contemporary congregation.

Maybe their new church meets in a barn.

Maybe their pastor is cooler than I am.

Maybe he wears jeans when he preaches.

I can't compete with all of that.

But if those young adults are worshiping somewhere and continuing to follow Jesus, I'm okay.

I miss them.

But I can celebrate what God is doing in their lives.

The departures that hurt me most are the people who leave our church and don't go anywhere.

Those bother me.

I try to stay connected when I can.

And interestingly, God has a way of crossing our paths again.

Sometimes years later, somebody who no longer attends our church calls because they're having surgery.

Or they've been diagnosed with cancer.

Or somebody they love is in the hospital.

I go.

I don't use the hospital visit to ask why they left the church.

I don't make them pay a membership penalty before I pray for them.

I want them to know:

We're still here.

There is no anger.

There is no bitterness.

You may not attend our church anymore, but I can still love you.

God Has Time to Reconcile People

Some people have left because they were angry with me.

Those are harder.

Usually, when someone leaves angry, they don't particularly want to talk to the person they're angry with.

So sometimes you have to let them go.

But one of the beautiful things about staying in the same community for a long time is that God has time to work.

There was a lady in our church who strongly opposed a major building project.

Eventually she became upset about something else and left the church.

She lived with another lady who continued attending.

Whenever I went to their home to visit the lady who still attended, the woman who had left would get up and leave the room.

I got the message.

When she first left the church, she told her roommate:

“That man will never do my funeral.”

That was pretty clear too.

But then she became sick.

And God opened a door.

I began ministering to her.

As her health progressively declined, our relationship progressively healed.

The woman who once left the room when I entered eventually wanted her former pastor around.

And by the end of her life, the woman who had said I would never conduct her funeral didn't want anybody else to do it.

God is good.

I don't tell that story because I eventually won.

There wasn't anything to win.

Reconciliation was the victory.

Had I carried a grudge, we might never have experienced it.

But because we were both still there, God had time to heal something that had been broken.

That's another benefit of staying.

You get to see some stories finish.

The People Who Come Back

For about the first twenty years of our ministry at WCFN, we had a very active van ministry.

We drove all over town picking up kids for Wednesday night church, mostly teenagers with a few younger children.

I didn't personally lead the teen ministry, but I drove one of the vans.

We picked them up.

Brought them to church.

Took them home.

Week after week.

You don't always know whether things like that are accomplishing very much.

Years later, one of the ladies from our church went to the bank to deposit the church offering.

The teller saw where she was from and told her:

“I used to go to that church.”

Our lady didn't recognize her.

Then the teller asked:

“Is Pastor Bill still there?”

I was.

It wasn't long before that young woman and her little baby boy started attending WCFN.

Eleven years later, they're still part of our church.

She remembered.

I had been there long enough for a teenager riding a church van to become an adult with a child of her own.

And when God began stirring something in her heart, there was still a familiar pastor at the same church.

That is something longevity can give you.

Longevity creates credibility when the pastor has lived a godly life before the community.

Not because you've been perfect.

You haven't.

But people have had enough years to decide whether what you preach on Sunday is really how you live.

What I Would Have Missed

If I had left WCFN after five years, I would have missed a lot.

I would have missed people coming back.

I would have missed reconciliations that took years.

I would have missed children becoming adults.

I would have missed seeing prayers answered that weren't answered quickly.

I would have missed watching God carry the church through seasons when I thought our best days might be behind us.

But maybe most importantly:

I would have missed lessons that can only be learned by staying in one place long enough to learn them.

Some things can't be taught in seminary.

Some things can't be learned at conferences.

Some things can't even be learned from books.

You have to stay.

You have to love people long enough to disappoint them and be disappointed by them.

You have to preach when the church is growing and preach when it isn't.

You have to bury saints who were sitting in the pews when you arrived.

You have to watch teenagers become parents.

You have to give God enough time to reconcile relationships you thought were finished.

You have to stay long enough to discover that the church isn't built around your five-year plan.

God works on a much longer timetable.

I don't believe every pastor is called to stay at one church for thirty years.

I don't even know how many more years God will have me at WCFN.

But I know this:

I don't want to leave because I'm hurt.

I don't want to leave because I'm bored.

I don't want to leave because another church looks more impressive.

And I don't want to stay merely because staying is comfortable.

I want to do what I've tried to do from the beginning.

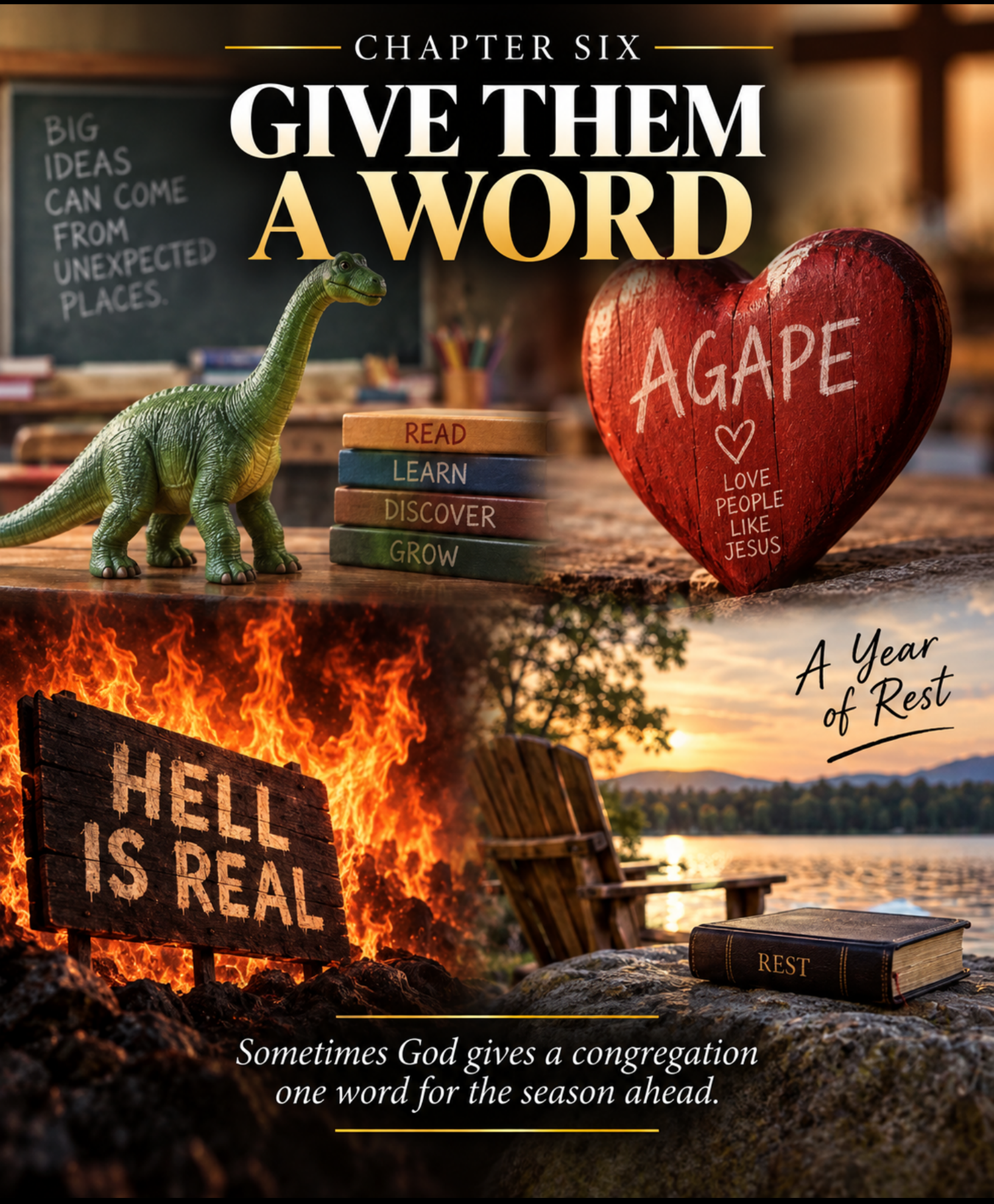
Go into the prayer closet.

Bring my church before God.

Listen.

And if He says stay—

stay.


CHAPTER SIX
GIVE THEM A WORD
BIG IDEAS CAN COME FROM UNEXPECTED PLACES.
READ
LEARN
DISCOVER
GROW
AGAPE
LOVE PEOPLE LIKE JESUS
HELL IS REAL
A Year of Rest
REST
Sometimes God gives a congregation one word for the season ahead.

Chapter 6

Give Them a Word

I learned one of my most valuable lessons about leading a church from a second-grade classroom.

And I wasn't even in the classroom.

In the early 1990s, while I was attending seminary in Kansas City, I worked afternoons as a teller at United Missouri Bank. One of the people I worked with was a young lady named Rochelle. She was studying elementary education and told me one day about a second-grade classroom where she was doing her student teaching.

The classroom had a theme.

> **Dinosaurs.**

I don't remember everything Rochelle told me, but I remember being fascinated by the idea. Dinosaurs weren't something the children studied for a week and then forgot. The teacher wove the theme throughout their school year. They read stories about dinosaurs. Even some of their math problems involved dinosaurs.

One simple idea kept showing up.

And I remember thinking:

> **Why couldn't we do something like that in church?**

Obviously, I wasn't suggesting that we spend a year preaching about dinosaurs.

But what if a congregation had one spiritual emphasis that kept showing up throughout the year? What if we returned to it in our sermons? What if our ministries reinforced it? What if we could give our people a simple word or phrase that helped them remember where we believed God was leading us?

I didn't know it then, but that conversation at the bank would influence the way I pastored for decades.

More Than a Slogan

Over the years, our themes have been all over the place.

> **Hell Is Real. A Year of Rest. Things Have to Change.**
> **Tables. Agape. Consumed.**

Some worked better than others. Some caught on immediately. Others didn't.

But somewhere along the way I became convinced that there is tremendous power in **giving a congregation a word**.

I don't mean coming up with a catchy slogan. This isn't marketing.

I mean prayerfully discerning a spiritual direction for the people God has entrusted to you and then finding a simple way of expressing that direction so they can remember it.

Rochelle gave me the **method**. God has to give me the **message**.

A pastor can sit in an office and come up with all kinds of clever ideas. We can design graphics. We can order T-shirts. We can come up with something that sounds really good on a church sign.

But before I stand before my congregation and say, "This is where I believe God wants us to go," I had better spend some time asking God where He wants us to go.

So the question isn't:

> **What would make a great theme?**

The question is:

> **Lord, what do You want to do in us next?**

That's why this chapter belongs in a book called *Pastoring from the Prayer Closet*. The word has to come from there.

Listen All Year

I wish I could give you five steps for discovering the perfect theme. I can't.

God has given me these words in all kinds of places. Sometimes while praying. Sometimes driving down the road. Sometimes through a song. Sometimes at a conference. Sometimes something simply gets into my spirit and won't leave.

The setting changes. The important thing is that I'm listening.

I normally reveal our new theme on the third Sunday of May, but I don't wait until May to start asking God about it. I'm listening throughout the year.

> **Don't wait until you need a word to start listening for one.**

Pray. Pay attention. Watch your people. And don't assume God can't use something unexpected. He used a bank teller talking about dinosaurs with me.

Make It Simple

My themes have gotten shorter over the years. We went from things like *Expect a Miracle*, *Things Have to Change* and *Everyone Win One* to:

> **Justice. Go. Tables. Gifts. Agape. Consumed.**

I've discovered there is power in one word.

People are busy. They have jobs, children, doctor's appointments, bills and a thousand other things competing for their attention.

And I hate to disappoint preachers, but most people aren't going home Sunday afternoon and reviewing our sermon notes.

One word can travel with them. They can remember it driving to work. They can see it on the refrigerator. They can recognize it six months later when it appears in another sermon.

> **Keep it simple.**

Give the Word a Picture

I've also learned that if I want people to remember the word, it helps if I give them a picture.

Tables was easy. You can see a table. It represented relationships. Families eating together. Christians building friendships. People inviting others into their lives.

For *Agape*, we gave everybody a heart. For *Consumed*, we gave them a sticker depicting fire with the words **Consumed by God**.

The sermon eventually ends. The PowerPoint disappears. The bulletin gets thrown away. But that little object goes home.

Somebody might see that heart three months later and remember: **Agape.** Maybe they're having trouble loving somebody, and the Holy Spirit reminds them that God has called us to love even difficult people.

Someone may see that *Consumed by God* sticker and suddenly ask, "What is consuming me right now?"

That's ministry. I may never know it happened.

> **Don't just give people a word they can remember. Give them something that helps them remember the word.**

Keep Giving Them the Word

You can't preach the theme once in May and expect it to shape the congregation for the next twelve months.

You have to keep bringing it back.

I normally return to our annual emphasis through sermon series two or three times during the year. We use the language in different ministries. Our leaders talk about it.

Eventually, something wonderful can happen. The congregation starts giving the word back to you.

That happened with *Tables*. I started hearing other people use the language. At that point it wasn't just "Pastor Bill's theme." It was becoming "our theme."

The pastor may discern the word. The pastor may introduce it. The pastor may preach it. But eventually other people have to carry it.

Teachers. Staff members. Ministry leaders. People sitting in the pew.

When the word starts coming from them instead of only from you, something is happening.

Sometimes the Word Doesn't Work

I need to admit something else. Sometimes you miss.

One of my favorite themes was **Connections**. I thought it was wonderful. We used interstate highway signs. We were connecting people to God. Staying connected to God. Traveling together.

I could see all kinds of possibilities. My congregation apparently couldn't.

Nobody hated it. There wasn't a church revolt. Nobody picketed the sanctuary carrying signs saying, "Down With Connections!"

It just never really caught on.

That's okay.

I've learned not to fall so much in love with my own ideas that I have to convince everybody they were secretly successful.

Maybe I missed God. Maybe the idea wasn't as good as I thought. Maybe God used it in ways I never saw.

I don't know.

After nearly thirty years of pastoring, I've become much more comfortable saying those three words.

> **I don't know.**

Our responsibility is faithfulness. God handles the results.

Sometimes the Word Prepares You

One of our earlier themes was **Things Have to Change**.

At the time, our church had reached a point where we needed to make some significant decisions about our future. Eventually we built a new sanctuary.

The theme didn't build the sanctuary. The theme didn't give sacrificially. **People did.**

But *Things Have to Change* gave us language for something God was already doing among us.

That's one of the things a God-given word can do. It can prepare people for something they don't completely understand yet. It can give a congregation a posture before there is a plan.

But a theme cannot create trust.

Trust comes from relationships. Hospital rooms. Funerals. Board meetings. Sunday mornings. Difficult conversations. Showing up. Staying.

That's another reason the order of this book matters.

Before you try to **give your people a word**, love your people. Pray for them. Show up for them. Stay with them.

Then, when God gives you some spiritual direction for the congregation, they know the heart of the pastor who is asking them to follow.

The Word Isn't the Point

This may be the most important lesson I've learned about annual themes.

> **The word isn't the point. Jesus is.**

The theme is a tool. The graphic is a tool. The little object we give people is a tool. The sermon series is a tool. Even the pastor is a tool.

We're trying to help people follow Jesus.

I don't want somebody to remember *Tables* because it was catchy. I want them to sit down with someone who is lonely.

I don't want people to remember *Agape* because we gave them a heart. I want them to love somebody who is difficult to love.

I don't want them to remember *Consumed* because we gave them a fire sticker. I want them to surrender more of themselves to God.

> **The goal isn't for people to remember the word. The goal is for the word to help shape how they live.**

So maybe somewhere there is a pastor wondering where God wants his congregation to go next.

I don't know your word. Rochelle doesn't know your word. That's between you and God.

So before you design the graphic, order the giveaways, plan the sermon series or announce anything to the congregation, go back to where this whole book began.

The prayer closet.

Ask:

Lord, where do You want to take these people You have entrusted to me?

Then listen.

And if God gives you a word - give it to them.

Preach it. Picture it. Repeat it. Live it with them. Let other people carry it.

And at the end of the year, don't simply ask, "Did they remember the word?"

Ask:

Did the word help them become more like Jesus?


CHAPTER SEVEN
YOU CAN'T DO EVERYTHING
PRAY
VISIT
CALL
DISCIPLE
PREACH
LEAD
IT'S A GREAT DAY TO PASTOR PEOPLE
Same People Same Purpose A Greater Tomorrow
Ministry Matters
HOLY BIBLE
Incoming Call
Church Family
Decline
Answer
Ministry Happens Beyond the Building
People Not Programs
Things to do: Week of August 17, 2026
What Went Well And Not So Much?
Curtis SS class
Priority One:
Call or text: Ronnie & Debbie
Call or text: Vickie
Call or text: Tonya
Call or text: Jamie
Call or text: David Gregory
Take Genie out to eat
Offer help to reconcile (call Harley and Preston)
Check on McKinney
Visit Miranda
Who Needs To Go To Ladies Retreat:
Follow up with list
Confirm attendees
Need:
Consider getting Rachael to clean up membership rolls
Plan something fun with Sulser grandkids
Pastor's scholarship: Trevecca (review details)
20/20/10 for last week
20 calls
20 texts
10 visits
5 invites
20/20/10 for this week
20 calls
20 texts
10 visits
5 invites
Monday
Staff meeting & deposit
Softball
Tuesday
Visit Gerald
Wednesday
Sermon prep
Church
Thursday
Talk with Cindy Roper at 2
Pickleball
Friday
Saturday
Sermon
Calls
Visits
People
Prayer
Famil
Lord, help me focus on what You want me to do today.
Pray
Plan
Prioritize
Be Present
Trust God

Chapter 7

You Can't Do Everything

There is always more ministry than there is time to do ministry.

Always.

You can make another phone call.

Visit another shut-in.

Spend another hour on Sunday's sermon.

Meet another leader for lunch.

Answer another email.

Attend another ballgame.

Work on another ministry.

If a pastor measures faithfulness by whether everything gets done, he is going to spend most of his ministry feeling like a failure.

Because everything will never get done.

It took me a while to understand something:

God hasn't asked me to do everything.

He has asked me to do what He asks me to do.

There is a difference.

My Week Has a Rhythm

I have a general rhythm to my week.

Monday begins by praying through the church directory. We have staff meeting. I make hospital visits. Normally, somewhere in there I play eighteen holes of golf. During softball season, Monday night may include church softball.

Tuesday usually begins my serious sermon research. I may have lunch with a leader or somebody I'm trying to connect with. There are visits and phone calls.

Wednesday begins with praying through the directory again. There is administrative work, hospital visitation, perhaps lunch with a leader or prospect, and Wednesday night church.

Thursday may begin with breakfast with a leader. Then there is sermon preparation, perhaps a visit with a prospect, and pickleball in the evening.

Friday I pray through the directory again. I normally fast breakfast and lunch on Fridays. I continue working on Sunday's sermon. Friday afternoon is generally reserved for my family.

Saturday morning we have praise-team practice at ten.

After that, I try to leave Saturday alone.

Then comes Sunday.

That is the rhythm.

But it isn't a prison.

I don't schedule every fifteen minutes of every day.

In fact, I intentionally leave a lot of my days fairly open.

I know what has to happen.

I need to pray.

I need to meet with my staff.

I need to prepare to preach.

Beyond that, I want room to pastor.

There Are No Interruptions

Someone may walk into the church while I'm working on a sermon.

That's not an interruption.

Someone may call because they're having a terrible day.

That's not an interruption.

A hospital visit may suddenly become necessary.

That's not an interruption.

Someone may stop by just because they want to talk.

That's not an interruption either.

Ministry isn't a constant interruption. Ministry is what we do.

That doesn't mean every conversation needs to last three hours.

If someone comes by just to talk, I often try to turn the conversation toward Jesus.

“What is God doing in your life?”

“How are things going spiritually?”

Sometimes I'll do something even more practical.

“Hey, I'm getting ready to go visit somebody. Would you like to go with me?”

Now the person who interrupted my sermon preparation is helping me do ministry.

And maybe I'm helping them learn to do ministry.

I like that better than protecting my calendar.

Leave Some White Space

I think pastors can schedule themselves right out of pastoral ministry.

If every hour is accounted for, what happens when somebody needs you?

What happens when the phone rings?

What happens when the prayer closet puts someone's name on your heart?

What happens when somebody walks into the office?

There needs to be some white space.

I have a plan for the day, but usually not a complicated one.

Prayer.

Staff.

Sermon preparation.

Maybe a scheduled visit or meal.

Then there is room.

Room for people.

Room for problems.

Room for opportunities.

Room for God to change the plan.

That doesn't feel inefficient to me.

That feels like pastoring.

God Usually Gives Me a Place to Put It

As I've mentioned before, when I pray through the directory, I often feel the Holy Spirit impressing something upon me.

Call this person.

Visit that person.

Check on this family.

Encourage that leader.

Usually when the Spirit brings something to mind, I also have a pretty good idea when I can do it.

Thursday evening might be a good time for some phone calls.

Saturday late morning might work for others.

Sometimes the need is immediate.

Obviously, a crisis takes priority.

After that, I generally think in terms of spiritual concerns.

Then come the normal checkups.

Somebody facing a spiritual crisis needs attention before somebody who is doing well and just hasn't heard from me lately.

That doesn't mean the person doing well isn't important.

It means I have accepted the fact that I can't do everything today.

Some Things Don't Get Done

I wish I could tell you that everything God puts on my heart gets checked off by Friday.

It doesn't.

Sometimes I don't call the person who has missed church for a couple of weeks.

Sometimes a meeting with a leader gets postponed.

Sometimes I don't call somebody who is doing well.

Sometimes a visit to one of our shut-ins gets pushed back.

I don't like that.

But it is reality.

There is always more ministry than time.

So I do the best I can to accomplish what I believe God has asked me to do.

Then I trust Him with the rest.

The Prayer Closet Eliminates a Lot of Guilt

Pastors can live with enormous guilt.

You should have visited more.

You should have called sooner.

You should have studied longer.

You should have attended that event.

You should have spent more time with your family.

You should have done more.

There is always another *should*.

Pastoring from the prayer closet has eliminated much of that guilt for me.

I begin by asking God what matters.

Then I try to do what He puts on my heart.

At the end of the day, I don't have to ask:

“Did I get everything done?”

I didn't.

The better question is:

“Lord, did I try to do what You asked me to do?”

There is tremendous freedom in that.

Prayer doesn't give me more hours.

It helps me know what deserves the hours I have.

Saying No Is Easier When People Know You Work

I've never had much trouble saying no.

Maybe part of the reason is that my people know I work hard.

They know I'm going to hospitals.

They know I'm preparing sermons.

They know I'm meeting people.

They know I'm showing up.

So when I say, “I can't do that,” I don't spend much time worrying about whether somebody thinks I'm lazy.

Trust gives you the freedom to say no.

And sometimes no is the most spiritual word a pastor can say.

Because every yes costs something.

If I say yes to one more meeting, I'm saying no to something else.

Maybe my family.

Maybe sermon preparation.

Maybe rest.

Maybe the person God actually wants me to see.

Meet Fred

One of the greatest administrative blessings God has given our church is our associate pastor, Regina.

I call her Fred.

There is a perfectly reasonable explanation.

Remember *Sanford and Son*?

Fred Sanford dealt in junk.

Regina takes care of the junk.

An electric company needs to be contacted about a benevolence request?

Fred.

A repairman needs to be called?

Fred.

Something went wrong with the mail?

Fred.

The copier has decided it no longer believes in sanctification?

Fred.

There are a hundred administrative details in the life of a church that have to be handled.

Regina handles so many of them.

And she is good at it.

That frees me to do more of what I believe God has called and gifted me to do.

Pastor people.

I didn't have a problem turning those responsibilities over to her.

Why would I insist on doing something somebody else can do better?

Delegation isn't avoiding ministry.

Sometimes delegation is what allows you to do your ministry.

I Didn't Ask Enough

If I could go back and change one part of my administrative leadership, I would expect more from our volunteer leaders.

For years I was hesitant to ask too much.

These people have jobs.

They have families.

They're volunteering.

I didn't want church to become another burden.

My motive wasn't bad.

But I think I set the bar too low.

I had good people who were capable of doing more.

They just needed to be asked.

And inspired.

I saw this clearly with our Wednesday night adult discipleship ministries.

There came a point when I needed to teach the teenagers.

That meant I couldn't continue doing everything I had been doing with the adults.

So Regina's husband, Curtis, and my wife, Kristi, stepped up and began men's and women's Bible studies.

And they took off.

I should have done it years earlier.

Sometimes the pastor doing less allows the congregation to do more.

That can be hard for pastors to understand.

We think:

If I don't do it, who will?

Maybe nobody.

But maybe somebody has been sitting in the pew waiting for you to ask.

Trust Your People

One of the biggest mistakes a small-church pastor can make is trying to do everything himself.

Small churches are especially vulnerable to this.

There isn't a huge staff.

There may not be a paid children's pastor, youth pastor, executive pastor, visitation pastor, communications director, facilities manager, and three administrative assistants.

So the pastor starts filling the gaps.

Before long, he is doing everything.

And everybody else is watching him do it.

That isn't healthy.

Trust your people.

They can do ministry.

In some situations, they will connect with people better than you can.

They have gifts you don't have.

They have relationships you don't have.

They can reach people you can't reach.

And if you do everything for them, they may never discover that.

The goal of pastoral leadership isn't to make the pastor indispensable.

The goal is to help the church become the church.

Faithfulness Isn't Finishing Everything

I will probably always have something left undone.

There will be another call I could have made.

Another person I could have visited.

Another paragraph of the sermon I could have improved.

Another meeting I could have scheduled.

That's okay.

Because faithfulness isn't getting everything done.

Faithfulness is doing what God has asked you to do.

That's why administration, at least for me, begins in the same place as everything else.

The prayer closet.

I bring my people before God.

I listen.

Sometimes He gives me a name.

Sometimes a need.

Sometimes an idea.

Sometimes a responsibility.

And then I get up and try to do it.

I won't get everything done.

Neither will you.

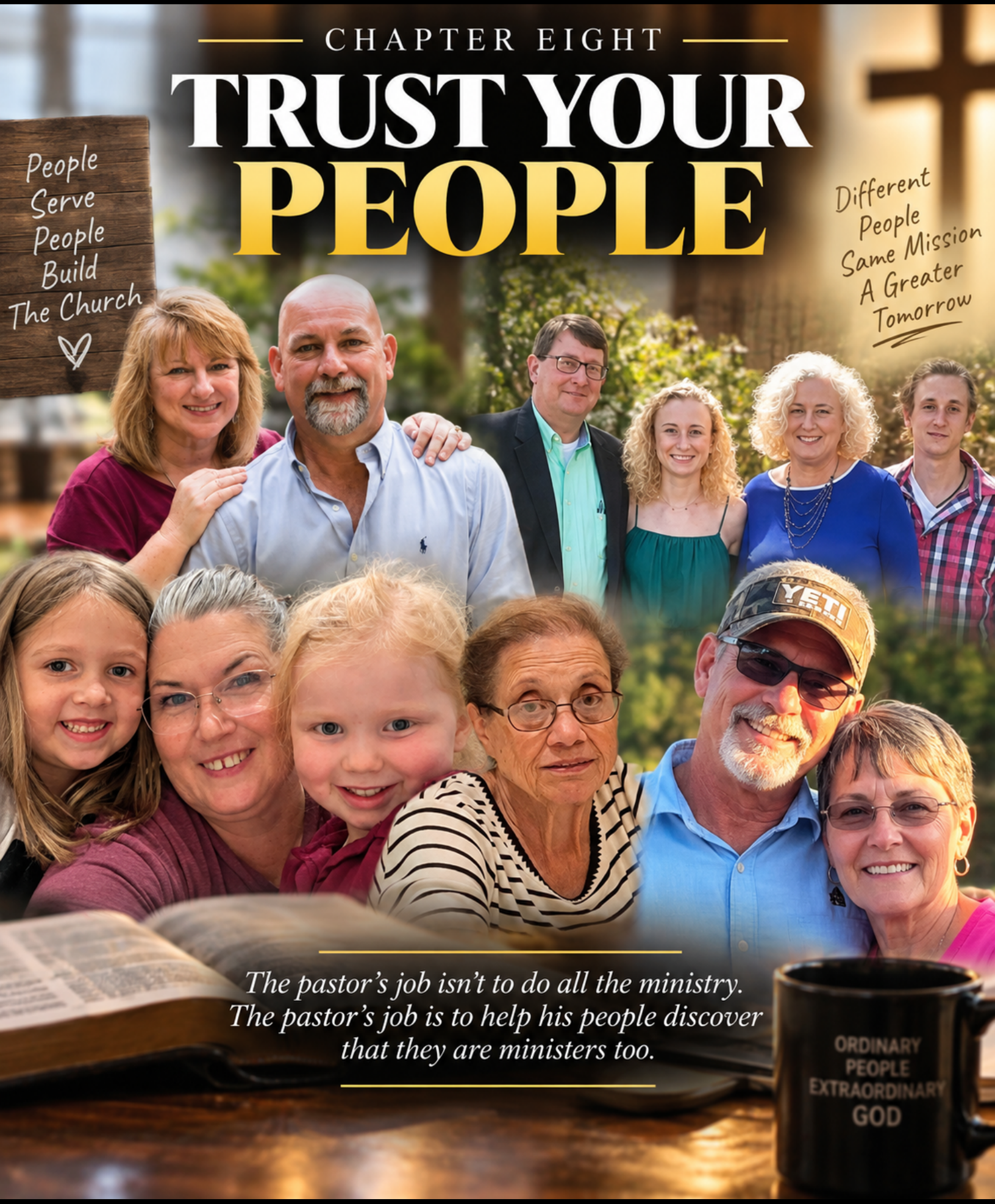
So quit trying to do everything.

Listen to God.

Trust your people.

Leave some room in your calendar.

And go pastor.


CHAPTER EIGHT
TRUST YOUR PEOPLE
People Serve People Build The Church
Different People Same Mission A Greater Tomorrow
YETI
The pastor's job isn't to do all the ministry. The pastor's job is to help his people discover that they are ministers too.
ORDINARY PEOPLE EXTRAORDINARY GOD

Chapter 8

Trust Your People

One of the biggest mistakes a small-church pastor can make is trying to do everything himself.

But sometimes that isn't entirely the pastor's fault.

Especially when I began pastoring in the late 1990s, many small churches expected the pastor to do just about everything.

Preach the sermons.

Teach the classes.

Visit the hospital.

Visit the shut-ins.

Lead the meetings.

Counsel the hurting.

Recruit the volunteers.

Plan the programs.

Make the decisions.

And probably unlock the church before everybody arrived and turn the lights off after everybody went home.

I was fresh out of school.

I was young.

I had energy.

I was up for the challenge.

And looking back, I think there was actually some value in that season.

Don't Arrive With a List of Things You Won't Do

I think it can be a mistake for a new pastor to arrive at a small church with a list of things he will and will not do.

“That's not my job.”

“I don't do that.”

“Someone else will need to handle that.”

Maybe eventually someone else should handle it.

But first, I think people need to know something about their pastor:

No job is beneath him.

If something needs to be done for the Kingdom, I'm willing to do it.

People need to know their pastor works hard.

They need to see him serve.

They need to know he isn't asking them to do things he considers beneath himself.

Especially when you're new, that matters.

Before people follow your leadership, they are watching your example.

So serve.

Work.

Show up.

Do some things that aren't necessarily in your job description.

But don't make the mistake of believing you need to do them forever.

Give Ministry Away

I've always been fairly comfortable giving ministry away.

In fact, I love watching other people minister.

I'm their biggest cheerleader.

There was one problem, though.

This may sound arrogant, but I'm a pretty good teacher.

And sometimes being good at something makes it harder to give away.

People would rather say:

“Pastor Bill can teach it.”

Well, yes.

I can.

But that doesn't mean I should.

If Pastor Bill teaches every class because Pastor Bill is a good teacher, how is anybody else ever going to become a good teacher?

Sometimes the best thing a pastor can do for the church is step out of a ministry he can do well so somebody else can learn to do it.

They may not be as good at first.

That's okay.

Neither were you.

Look at the Heart First

When I'm looking for a potential leader, talent isn't the first thing I look for.

I look at the heart.

If the heart isn't right, talent can't overcome it.

A gifted person with the wrong heart can do enormous damage.

After heart, I want dependability.

Will they show up?

Can people count on them?

And maybe one of the greatest qualifications of all is availability.

You can have tremendous gifts, but if you aren't available, those gifts aren't going to help very much.

I also like different personalities.

I'm an introvert.

So give me some outgoing leaders.

Please.

I don't need everybody on the leadership team to think like me, act like me, or relate to people like me.

Actually, the church will be healthier if they don't.

Give Somebody a Chance

I like giving ministry opportunities to people who aren't completely ready.

Maybe that's because somebody once gave me an opportunity before I had everything together.

I'm glad they did.

If we wait until people are completely prepared before allowing them to serve, we may wait forever.

People learn ministry by doing ministry.

That means occasionally they are going to make mistakes.

I've had plenty of people fail after I gave them an opportunity.

I normally don't regret giving them the chance.

We try to respond with grace and understanding.

If anything, our problem has probably been the opposite.

We've occasionally left somebody in a ministry too long when it had become apparent that another ministry might fit them better.

Grace doesn't mean pretending something is working when it isn't.

Sometimes loving a person means helping them find another place to serve.

Ask Them

We announce ministry opportunities.

We tell people when volunteers are needed.

But most of the time, I think personal recruitment works better.

I approach somebody and say:

“Would you consider this ministry opportunity?”

There is a big difference between hearing:

“We need another Sunday School teacher.”

and hearing:

“Bill, I've been praying, and I think you might be good at this. Would you pray about it?”

One is an announcement.

The other is a calling.

And once again, this often begins in the prayer closet.

Just this week while I was praying, the Lord brought a man to my mind.

He had taught our teenage Sunday School class years ago but hadn't done it in a couple of decades.

I felt impressed to ask him about teaching again.

So Sunday I approached him.

And he was open to it.

I could have assumed:

He hasn't done that in twenty years. He probably doesn't want to do it.

Instead, I asked.

That sounds ridiculously simple.

But I've learned that sometimes people aren't serving because nobody has asked them.

Let Them Do It Differently

If I'm going to give somebody a ministry, I also have to allow it to become their ministry.

Most of the time, I'm perfectly comfortable with somebody doing something differently than I would.

There are exceptions.

Some ministries have necessary expectations.

For example, our shepherding ministry has certain parameters. Each shepherd has responsibility for a particular group of people. They are expected to call them and care for them. If we remove that expectation, it really isn't the same ministry anymore.

So delegation doesn't mean there are never standards.

But within those standards, people need room.

They don't have to sound like me.

They don't have to organize like me.

They don't have to teach like me.

They don't have to lead like me.

If I wanted everything done exactly like Pastor Bill would do it, I shouldn't have given it away.

From Office Manager to Pastor

One of the best examples of this in our church is Regina.

Regina first and foremost loves the Lord.

And she loves people.

Those two things matter more to me than almost anything else.

For years she worked as my office manager while also working professionally as a secretary in an OB-GYN office.

She was accustomed to handling what I affectionately call the junk.

And she became very good at it.

Eventually, she knew me so well that she could correspond with people for me.

She learned how I communicated.

She could write something that sounded like me.

There were even a few occasions when somebody thanked me for a note or email and I didn't know I had sent it.

Apparently, I was becoming very productive.

Over time, however, something deeper was happening.

God was calling Regina into ministry.

She loved the church.

She saw needs in the church she believed she could help meet.

And eventually her role changed from helping the pastor do ministry to becoming one of the pastors herself.

Interestingly, the transition wasn't dramatic.

There weren't huge changes.

In many ways, Regina was already ministering to people.

The biggest adjustment may have been helping the congregation begin seeing her differently.

Not merely as the person in the office.

Not merely as Pastor Bill's assistant.

But as their pastor too.

I've intentionally wanted that.

If one of our ladies would rather have Regina pray with her before a procedure, wonderful.

I don't need to be everybody's pastor in every situation.

I want people to be pastored.

There's a difference.

Hey Beau Bible Study

I learned another lesson about giving ministry away on Wednesday nights.

At one point, I needed to begin teaching our teenagers.

That meant I couldn't continue doing everything I had been doing with our adults.

So my wife, Kristi, and Regina's husband, Curtis, stepped in.

Kristi is a teacher by profession and has a heart of gold.

Curtis is an incredible team builder.

People just like being around him.

He's also a country boy.

He calls everybody “Beau.”

Apparently he says it enough that one of the members eventually made shirts for everybody that said:

HEY BEAU BIBLE STUDY

That's hard to compete with.

Their men's and women's Bible studies took off.

I wasn't surprised.

They're good at what they do.

People enjoy being with them.

And sometimes people like hearing biblical truth from a voice other than the pastor's.

Actually, sometimes the pastor can scare people off.

There are conversations people will have with Curtis that they might never have with me.

There are women who will connect with Kristi or Regina differently than they connect with me.

That's not a weakness in the church.

That's a strength.

I wish I had released some of those ministries sooner.

Everyone Is a Minister

I believe everyone is a minister.

Not everyone is a preacher.

Not everyone is a teacher.

Not everyone should chair a committee.

Please don't let everyone chair a committee.

But everybody can minister.

Part of our responsibility as pastors is helping people discover where.

That means we need a wide net.

There need to be lots of opportunities.

Somebody can teach.

Somebody can visit.

Somebody can call.

Somebody can work with children.

Somebody can greet.

Somebody can help with food.

Somebody can work on the building.

Somebody can encourage.

Somebody can pray.

Somebody can drive.

Somebody can sit beside a lonely person.

Somebody can do something.

The question isn't:

“Are you a minister?”

The question is:

“Where is your ministry?”

Maybe They Will

Looking back, I think one of my administrative failures was assuming too quickly that people wouldn't do certain things.

I didn't want to ask too much.

They're busy.

They have jobs.

They have families.

They already have responsibilities.

So sometimes I didn't ask.

I thought I was being considerate.

Sometimes I was simply setting the bar too low.

People will often rise to an expectation when somebody believes in them.

They may need encouragement.

They may need training.

They may need somebody standing behind them saying:

“You can do this.”

And they may fail.

That's okay.

Give them some grace.

Help them learn.

Let them try again.

Maybe move them somewhere else.

But don't decide what people won't do before you give them the opportunity.

Trust Your People

I knew I was becoming a better pastor when I stopped thinking people wouldn't do ministry and started encouraging them to take chances.

That's a lesson I wish I had learned earlier.

Pastors sometimes look around a small congregation and see all the things people can't do.

We don't have enough people.

We don't have enough money.

We don't have enough leaders.

We don't have enough talent.

Maybe.

But look again.

There are people sitting in those pews whom God has gifted.

There are teachers who haven't taught yet.

There are shepherds who haven't been given anybody to shepherd.

There are encouragers who don't realize encouragement is ministry.

There are leaders who need someone to believe in them.

There may even be a future pastor answering the telephone in the church office.

Trust your people.

Ask them.

Give them a chance.

Cheer for them.

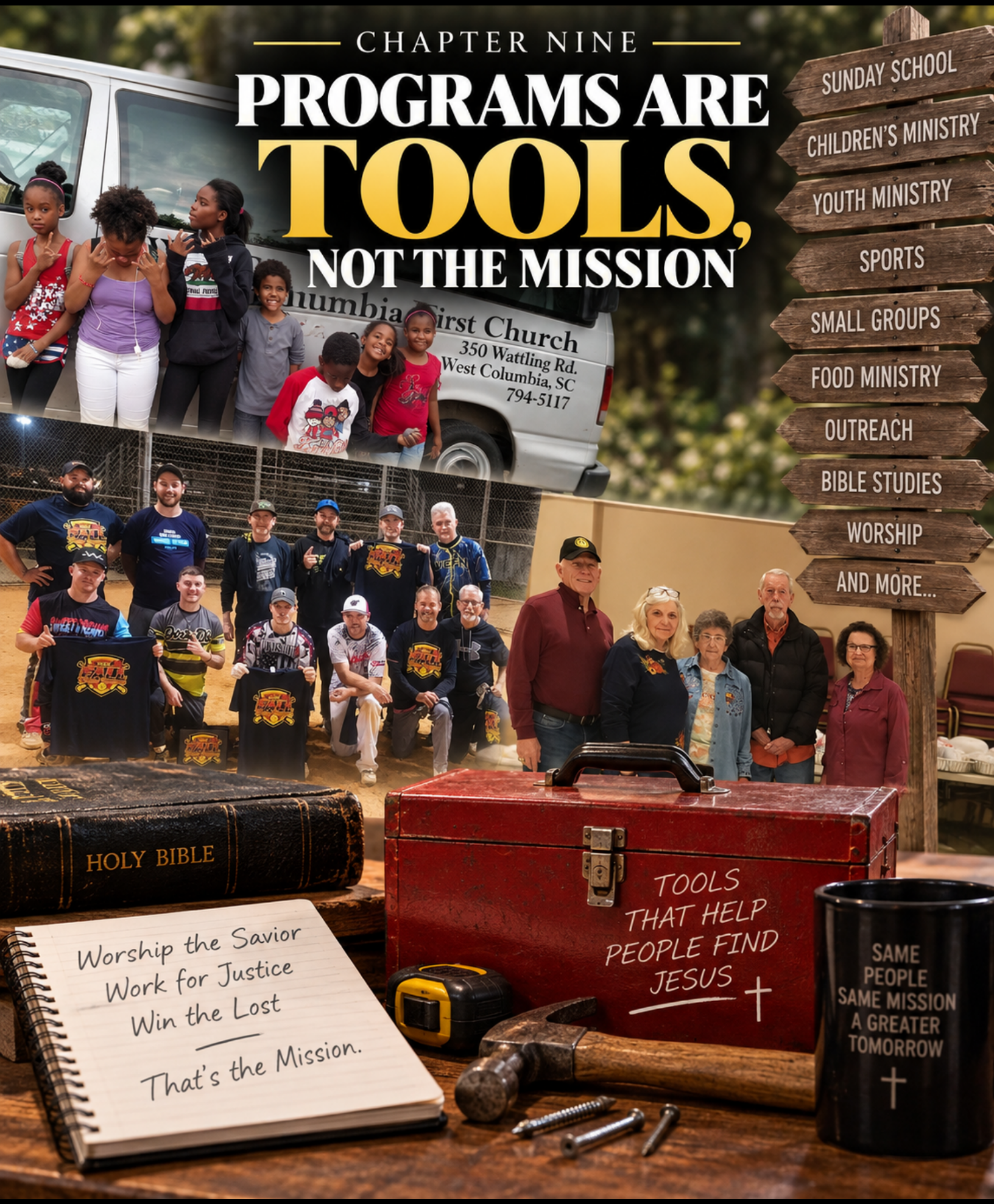
Give them room to do things differently.

Give them grace when they fail.

And remember:

The pastor's job isn't to do all the ministry.

The pastor's job is to help his people discover that they are ministers too.


CHAPTER NINE
PROGRAMS ARE TOOLS, NOT THE MISSION
SUNDAY SCHOOL
CHILDREN'S MINISTRY
YOUTH MINISTRY
SPORTS
SMALL GROUPS
FOOD MINISTRY
OUTREACH
BIBLE STUDIES
WORSHIP
AND MORE...
First Church
350 Wattling Rd.
West Columbia, SC
794-5117
HOLY BIBLE
TOOLS THAT HELP PEOPLE FIND JESUS
Worship the Savior
Work for Justice
Win the Lost
That's the Mission.
SAME PEOPLE
SAME MISSION
A GREATER TOMORROW

Chapter 9

Programs Are Tools, Not the Mission

Churches have programs.

Sunday School.

Bible studies.

Children's ministries.

Youth ministries.

Sports.

Food ministries.

Small groups.

Outreach events.

Some churches have so many programs that you need a program to keep up with the programs.

But programs aren't the mission.

They are tools that help us accomplish the mission.

At our church, we have said for years that we want to **worship the Savior, work for justice, and win the lost.**

That's the mission.

Everything else is supposed to help us do that.

And if it doesn't, we probably need to ask why we're doing it.

Sometimes God Starts the Ministry

I think new ministries should begin with God.

Sometimes God puts an idea into someone's heart.

Years ago, a man in our church named John had his son involved in an Upward basketball program at a megachurch.

John began wondering if our church could have a team.

He didn't just wonder.

He went to the league director and asked if we formed a team whether we could participate in their program.

They said yes.

John came back to us with the idea, and a ministry was born.

It had a good run of about five years.

New families connected with our church.

Relationships were formed.

Lives were touched.

But many of our ministries haven't begun because somebody sat in a meeting and said:

“We need a new program.”

They began because God did something.

We simply reacted to what He was already doing.

The best example I know is our van ministry.

Brianna Invited Jennifer

Nobody came into my office and said:

“Pastor, I believe God wants us to canvass mobile home parks and develop a major Wednesday-night transportation ministry for teenagers.”

I'm glad they didn't.

That sounds exhausting.

What happened was much simpler.

Brianna invited Jennifer to church.

Jennifer came.

Then she told us she would come on Wednesday nights if somebody would pick her up.

We had a church van.

And we had Rod.

Rod was a retired Navy man and a senior adult who was willing to drive.

That's about all the strategic planning that went into it.

We had a girl who wanted to come.

We had a van.

We had Rod.

So Rod went to pick up Jennifer.

When he got there, Jennifer had invited a couple of other people.

So Rod picked them up too.

Then there were more.

Within a few weeks, we had a van full of teenagers coming to church.

Within a year, we were making two trips to get everybody.

Eventually we bought another van because one wasn't enough.

We didn't start that ministry.

God did.

We just tried to keep up with Him.

Watch What God Is Doing

That experience taught me something about ministry.

Pastors can spend an enormous amount of time asking:

“What should our church do?”

Maybe occasionally we should ask another question:

“What is God already doing?”

God was already working in Jennifer.

Jennifer was already inviting friends.

Rod was already available.

We already owned a van.

The opportunity was sitting right in front of us.

Our responsibility was to recognize it and join in.

That's one reason the prayer closet matters so much to leadership.

I don't want to manufacture ministry just because another church has a successful program.

I want to recognize where God is moving among our people and in our community.

Then let's go there.

The Right People Matter More Than the Right Program

That van ministry became unusually effective, but it wasn't because we discovered some revolutionary youth-ministry strategy.

We had people who loved those kids.

Joey Middlebrooks was leading our teenagers when the ministry really began growing.

Joey was a special-needs teacher. His wife, Tiffany, was a nurse. They had three small children of their own.

And they poured themselves into some pretty crazy and troubled kids.

They loved them.

Some of those teenagers eventually went on summer mission trips with them.

We came very close to hiring Joey as our full-time youth pastor. I thought that was probably where everything was headed.

Instead, God led Joey and Tiffany to a rural part of our state.

I thought:

Well, this may be the end of the van ministry.

It wasn't.

God had already put other people around those kids.

Howard Weed.

Linda Hagins.

Francine Felder.

Rod Stricker.

Howard, Linda, and Rod were in their sixties. Francine was in her late thirties.

Nobody had read the church-growth book that said the secret to a thriving teenage outreach was putting a bunch of sixty-year-olds in charge.

But apparently God hadn't read it either.

In some ways, the ministry grew even larger.

Why?

They loved those kids.

That's difficult to put into a program manual.

The ministry fit our congregation.

We weren't trying to be cool.

We weren't pretending to be something we weren't.

We never thought we were better than those kids or their families.

We simply loved them.

Sometimes the best ministry strategy is having the right people with the right hearts in the right place when God opens a door.

It Is Okay to Have a Funeral

Not every ministry lasts forever.

And that's okay.

Our Upward basketball ministry had a productive run of about five years.

Families came.

Relationships were built.

Lives were touched.

Then the leaders' lives became fuller.

The need wasn't as great.

The passion began to fade.

So we let it end.

I don't think every ministry has to be kept on life support.

Sometimes it is perfectly appropriate to bury a ministry.

Have a funeral if you need to.

But make it a celebration.

Thank God for the people who served.

Tell the stories.

Remember the lives that were changed.

Celebrate what God did.

And then let it go.

A ministry doesn't have to last forever to have been successful.

Then Again, Sometimes We Keep One Going

I wish I could tell you we have always known exactly when to stop something.

We haven't.

Our Sunday afternoon service is probably an example.

It began during COVID.

Some of our people were uncomfortable coming inside the building, so we developed a parking-lot service.

We had a portable sound system.

Every Sunday afternoon at four, Kristi and I would sing some old hymns, and I would bring a short sermon.

People stayed in their cars.

Some rolled down their windows.

I would walk around and greet them from a safe distance.

We never had a huge crowd.

Eight or ten cars might come faithfully.

Eventually people began returning to regular worship.

But one couple kept coming to the afternoon service because the wife was struggling with Parkinson's disease. Walking had become difficult, and the parking-lot service was one of the few ways she could continue worshiping with her church.

So we kept doing it.

Then her husband unexpectedly died.

That eventually limited her ability to attend.

By that point, however, something else had happened.

We had a faithful little group of eight or ten people who enjoyed worshiping together every Sunday afternoon.

Eventually we moved the service inside to a classroom.

And we're still doing it.

I've thought about ending it several times.

Maybe we've kept it going too long.

But it doesn't require a great deal of preparation from me. I bring a short message, we sing hymns, and these people genuinely seem to enjoy being together.

So for now, it continues.

Ministry isn't always neat.

Sometimes you know exactly when something is over.

Sometimes you keep asking the question.

Three Years and Almost Nobody Came

A couple of years after I came to WCFN, things were going well.

I had energy.

Probably too much energy.

I became convinced we should start a church in a small community about twenty-five minutes away.

Looking back, I'm not sure I would recommend my church-planting strategy.

I went to the church board and basically said:

“I've got a lot of energy. I'll do it on Thursday nights.”

They agreed.

I contacted the town administrator about using an old school building.

To my surprise, she let us use it at no cost.

I made a sign.

And off I went.

Very few people came.

So I changed things.

I moved it to Sunday afternoons.

Still very little happened.

A middle-aged man came, sometimes bringing his son and his son's girlfriend.

I tried different things.

Nothing seemed to work.

I did this for probably three years.

By almost every church-growth measurement, it was a failure.

I don't view it that way.

I believed God wanted me to do it.

So I did it.

I was faithful to what I believed God had asked of me.

I can live with the results.

That's important because pastors can become obsessed with outcomes.

We should evaluate ministry.

We should learn.

We should make changes.

But ultimately, **obedience belongs to us. Results belong to God.**

Sometimes God lets you ride around town in two vans full of teenagers.

Sometimes He lets you preach in an old school building to almost nobody.

Be faithful in both.

The Megachurch Doesn't Pastor Your People

I think small-church pastors should pay attention to what larger churches are doing.

We can learn from them.

I have learned from them.

There is no virtue in refusing to learn just because another church is bigger than yours.

But there has to be something more than:

“That worked at their church.”

There has to be an *oughtness* about it.

I need to sense:

“This is what we ought to do.”

That comes from God.

When we built our sanctuary, conventional church-growth wisdom was moving in a particular direction.

Use individual chairs instead of pews.

Have a stage rather than a traditional choir loft.

Make the room flexible.

Use a more contemporary design.

We didn't.

We built a traditional sanctuary.

We sometimes say it looks like a church from days gone by.

Before a district pastor-and-spouse retreat, we had a guest speaker who was leading what was then the largest Nazarene church in America.

He told the pastors that I had messed up by putting pews in our new sanctuary instead of removable chairs.

Maybe he was right.

Maybe we'd have grown more if we'd added smoke machines and revolving lights.

I don't know.

What I do know is that we followed what we believed God was calling **our church** to do.

And to this day, there are people who appreciate worshiping in a building that looks like a church.

I'm comfortable with that.

The pastor of a megachurch doesn't pastor your people.

You do.

Learn from everybody.

Copy nobody blindly.

Listen to God.

Numbers Matter—But Discipleship Matters More

Numbers matter.

I don't think we need to pretend they don't.

If a ministry is supposed to reach people and nobody ever comes, that tells us something.

If participation continually declines, pay attention.

If nobody wants to lead it anymore, pay attention.

But numbers aren't the final measurement.

Discipleship rules the day.

If somebody is becoming more like Jesus, something worthwhile is happening.

Kristi has a passion for Teen Bible Quizzing.

Our teenagers?

Maybe not quite as much.

Sometimes there are only a couple of them.

But Kristi keeps pouring the Word of God into those kids.

More importantly, she lives the Christian life in front of them.

They're becoming more like Jesus.

They probably don't even know it.

That matters.

Two kids becoming more like Christ may be more important than fifty kids attending something that isn't changing anybody.

Even Softball Can Be Ministry

People occasionally wonder why a church spends money and time having a softball team.

I understand the question.

But softball gives us an opportunity to develop relationships with people who need Jesus.

And frankly, I already spend way too much of my time around Christians.

If playing softball puts me around people I wouldn't otherwise know, I can see ministry value in that.

A softball team isn't the mission.

It's a tool.

The question is whether we're using the tool for the mission.

The same applies to almost everything else we do.

If You Want Me to Spend Money, Show Me a Life

My church people have learned something about their pastor.

If you want me to spend money, show me how it might change somebody's life.

I'm pretty easy after that.

If it doesn't have much connection to changing lives, I'm probably going to drag my feet.

Even building improvements get filtered through that question.

Don't just tell me:

“We need to remodel the foyer in the Family Life Center.”

Tell me:

“We believe more parents might stay for Wednesday-night Bible studies if this area were more welcoming and updated.”

Now I'm listening.

A building is a tool.

A van is a tool.

A basketball program is a tool.

A softball team is a tool.

Money is a tool.

The question is:

Can we use this to help people know Jesus and become more like Him?

Sacred Cows Still Need to Serve the Mission

One of the closest things we've had to a sacred cow is worship style.

Our people love hymns.

So do I.

But we made a decision to have blended worship.

We sing hymns.

We also sing contemporary songs.

That probably means we don't completely satisfy either group.

That's okay.

The goal isn't to keep everybody perfectly satisfied.

The goal is worship.

Traditions can be wonderful servants.

They're terrible masters.

Keep the things that help accomplish the mission.

Be willing to change the things that don't.

Don't Fall in Love With the Program

I don't think we should keep a ministry alive simply because we like it.

That's difficult because ministries collect memories.

People were saved there.

Our children grew up there.

We met our spouse there.

We taught that class for twenty years.

We bought that van.

We built that room.

Those memories matter.

Celebrate them.

But don't confuse the tool with the mission.

At the same time, don't make the opposite mistake and act as though programs don't matter.

If every program at WCFN disappeared tomorrow, our mission would still be to worship the Savior, work for justice, and win the lost.

But without ways to actually do those things, not much would happen.

Programs are the vehicles that help carry the mission.

So don't worship the vehicle.

But don't throw away the vehicle either.

Ask:

Is it taking us where God wants us to go?

Is it changing lives?

Are people passionate about it?

Is somebody becoming more like Jesus?

Is it helping us reach somebody we otherwise wouldn't reach?

Is God still in this?

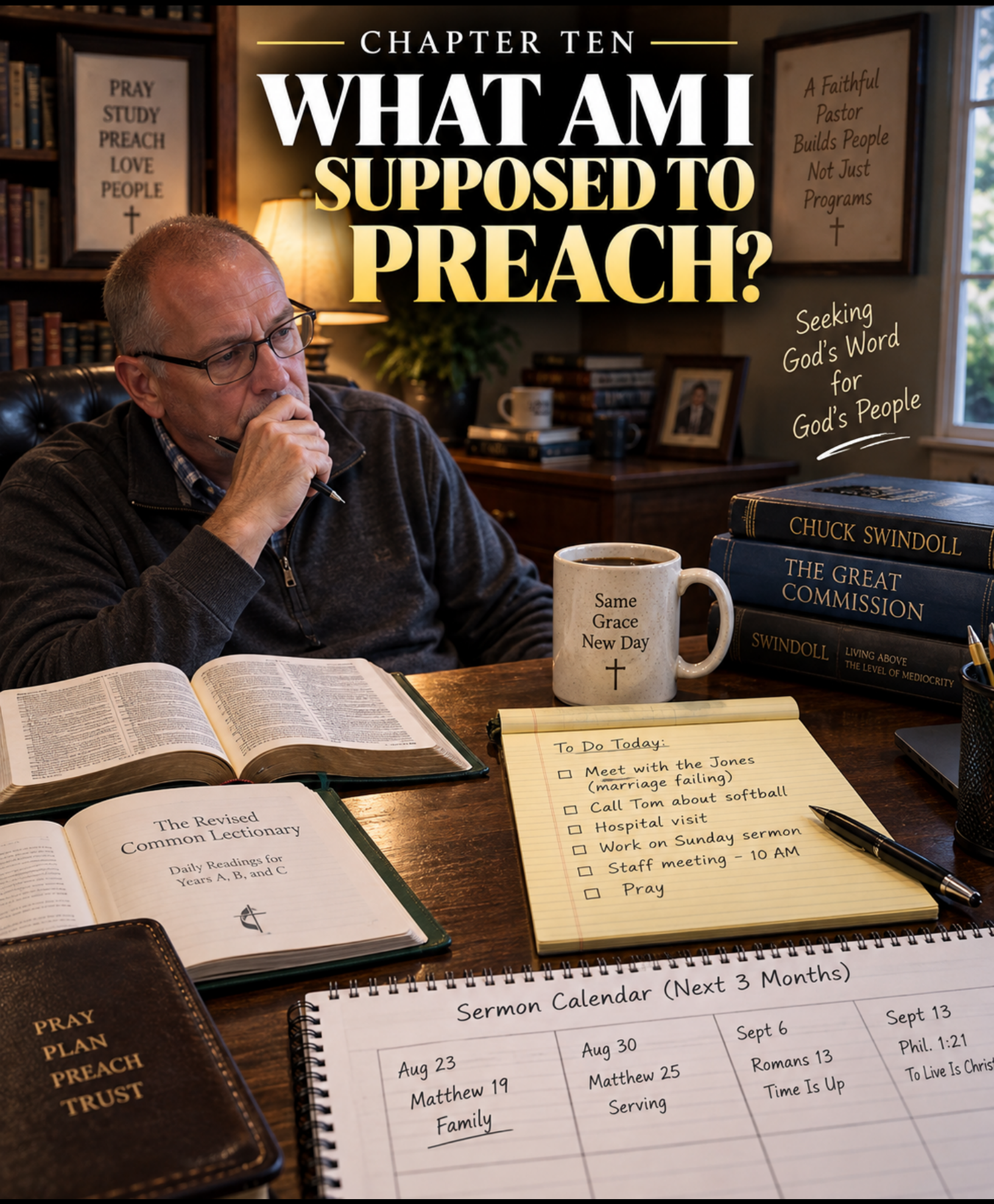
If the answer is yes, pour yourself into it.

If the answer becomes no, don't be afraid to celebrate what God did and let it end.

And when something unexpected starts happening—when Jennifer asks for a ride, brings a couple of friends, and suddenly Rod's church van is full—

pay attention.

God may be starting your next ministry before you've even had a meeting.


CHAPTER TEN
WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO PREACH?
Seeking God's Word for God's People
PRAY STUDY PREACH LOVE PEOPLE
A Faithful Pastor Builds People Not Just Programs
CHUCK SWINDOLL
THE GREAT COMMISSION
SWINDOLL
LIVING ABOVE THE LEVEL OF MEDIOCRITY
Same Grace New Day
To Do Today:
Meet with the Jones (marriage failing)
Call Tom about softball
Hospital visit
Work on Sunday sermon
Staff meeting – 10 AM
Pray
The Revised Common Lectionary
Daily Readings for Years A, B, and C
PRAY PLAN PREACH TRUST
Sermon Calendar (Next 3 Months)
Aug 23
Matthew 19
Family
Aug 30
Matthew 25
Serving
Sept 6
Romans 13
Time Is Up
Sept 13
Phil. 1:21
To Live Is Christ

Chapter 10

What Am I Supposed to Preach?

Sunday comes every seven days.

I've checked.

You can preach the greatest sermon of your life, go home feeling like God really helped you, and before long you have to do it again.

What am I going to preach?

After nearly thirty years of preaching to many of the same people, you might think that question gets easier.

In some ways it does.

In other ways, it never does.

Because I don't simply want a sermon.

I want the sermon God wants me to preach.

There's a difference.

I Believe in a Sermon Calendar

I'm a big believer in planning.

Normally, I work with a sermon calendar about three months at a time.

Somewhere around the middle of those three months, I begin thinking and praying about the next three.

But I don't just sit down with a calendar and start filling boxes.

I intentionally get alone with God.

I pray.

I listen.

I look at Scripture.

I think about where we've been and where I sense God may be taking us.

Often during those times, the general idea for a sermon series begins to form.

I can't stress enough how important prayer is in that process.

God knows the future.

I don't.

God knows what will happen in our church six weeks from now.

I don't.

He knows who will walk through the doors.

He knows what our people will be facing.

He knows what our congregation will need to hear.

So if I'm going to plan sermons three months ahead, I had better spend some time talking to the One who already knows what those three months will hold.

I Like the Lectionary

I've often felt led to use the lectionary.

I like the discipline of allowing the biblical text to come to me rather than always choosing the text I want to preach.

But I don't think there has ever been a year when I followed the lectionary exclusively.

Normally, there are two or three times during the year when I move away from it.

Sometimes that's because of an annual church theme.

Sometimes it's a sermon series.

Sometimes I simply sense God leading us somewhere else.

Our annual themes frequently affect the preaching calendar.

Occasionally, the lectionary and the annual theme come together beautifully. Our recent emphasis on being **Consumed** was one of those times.

I love when that happens.

But I don't want to force it.

If my theme is Consumed, I don't need to make every biblical passage somehow say “Consumed.”

Let the text speak.

The theme serves Scripture.

Scripture doesn't serve the theme.

Stay With the Text

There have been occasions when I looked at the sermon calendar, looked at the biblical text, and had absolutely nothing.

Nothing.

I knew what the calendar said I was supposed to preach.

I believed that was the passage God had led me to months earlier.

But now that I was staring at it, I couldn't find the sermon.

Those are scary moments.

I've prayed:

“God, You're going to have to give me another text.”

Most of the time, He doesn't.

Apparently, the problem wasn't the text.

It was the preacher.

So I pray some more.

I research some more.

I keep reading.

I keep listening.

And almost every time, somewhere in that process, something happens.

The text begins to open.

The message begins to emerge.

And eventually there is an *oughtness* about it.

I know:

This is what I ought to preach.

I've learned not to abandon a text too quickly just because I don't immediately see the sermon.

Sometimes God gave me the text three months ago.

Now He is asking me to trust Him long enough to give me the message.

I'm Waiting for Peace

I can't completely explain what happens next.

There comes a point in sermon preparation when I know.

I've researched.

I've prayed.

I've worked with the text.

I've written.

I've wrestled.

And then the Spirit gives me an assurance:

This is the Word for the people.

Earlier in my ministry, I seemed to wrestle for that assurance more often.

There were nights I would stay up half the night searching for that *oughtness*.

I don't have as many of those nights anymore.

Maybe I've learned to recognize the Spirit's voice a little better.

Maybe I've learned to trust Him more.

I'm not completely sure.

But the dependence hasn't changed.

I don't want to go into the pulpit simply because I have completed a manuscript.

I want to go because I believe I've heard from God.

Thus Saith the Lord

That sounds bold.

Maybe even arrogant.

But I think there is something prophetic about preaching.

The prophet doesn't stand before God's people and say:

“I've been thinking, and here's an interesting idea.”

There should be a sense of:

“Thus saith the Lord.”

I'm not claiming every thought in my sermon came directly from heaven.

I'm certainly not claiming my interpretation is infallible.

I'm a preacher.

I can be wrong.

And I can bomb.

Believe me, I have.

But by the time I enter the pulpit, I want to have done everything I know to do to settle one question:

Is this the message I believe God wants me to give these people today?

If the answer is yes, I can preach it.

Sometimes God Changes the Plan

Not often, but occasionally I've changed what was on the sermon calendar because I sensed the Spirit leading me in another direction.

Even more rarely, there have been a couple of occasions when God changed the message during the worship service.

Those moments are uncomfortable.

I like preparation.

I like knowing where we're going.

I don't think lack of preparation is spirituality.

But sometimes God seems to ask:

“Do you trust Me?”

If I genuinely believe the Spirit is leading, I want to follow.

That doesn't mean every passing thought during worship is the Holy Spirit.

We should test those impressions.

But I would rather have a carefully prepared sermon surrendered to God than a carefully prepared sermon that God isn't allowed to interrupt.

Don't Force the Sermon Onto Somebody

Pastoring a small church creates an interesting preaching problem.

You know your people.

You know who is struggling.

You know whose marriage is hurting.

You know who is angry.

You know who hasn't been getting along.

And sometimes you know things you wish you didn't know.

So what happens when Sunday's text addresses exactly what somebody in the congregation is doing?

Preach the text.

If I'm preaching what the text says and what I believe the Lord has given me, I can't spend the sermon worrying about whether somebody thinks I'm preaching at them.

Sometimes the Word lands hard.

That's between them and God.

Years ago, during the conflict between the United States and Iraq, I preached a sermon called **“Insurgents.”**

The message dealt with the danger of people within a group who work against it and try to destroy it from the inside.

At the time, there was a lady in our church who did not particularly care for her pastor.

That's putting it nicely.

Bless her heart.

Her husband was our Sunday School superintendent.

A month or two after I preached that sermon, we held our annual meeting. Her husband was sick, so she presented his report.

She began by announcing:

“I just want you to know that I am not an insurgent!”

I hadn't said she was.

Apparently the sermon had stayed with her.

She went on to say some things about me that upset several of our people.

I tried to respond with grace and kindness.

Thankfully, the congregation followed my lead.

I didn't need to use the pulpit to settle the disagreement.

The Word of God doesn't need to become the pastor's weapon against people who irritate him.

Just Preach the Word

More recently, a young couple began attending our church.

They came to Christ.

They began growing.

We were excited about what God was doing in their lives.

Then we discovered they had moved in together.

As their pastor, I knew there was eventually a conversation that needed to happen.

So I prayed.

“Lord, give me the opportunity.”

And, if I'm being truthful:

“Lord, give me the courage.”

Then the sermon already on the calendar dealt with sexual immorality.

Well, there you go.

I preached the text.

I didn't redesign the sermon around them.

I didn't stare at them while I preached that part.

I didn't add a paragraph that wasn't in the text just to make sure they got the message.

I preached what I believed God had given me.

They didn't seem offended at all.

My responsibility was to preach the Word and continue loving them.

The Holy Spirit can handle His part.

Preach to Yourself

After nearly thirty years, I've preached many biblical passages more than once.

Of course I have.

If I preached Psalm 23 twenty years ago, that doesn't mean I'm never allowed to preach it again.

Normally, when I return to a passage I've preached before, I look at the old sermon.

There was research involved.

There may be historical information, word studies, illustrations, or insights that are still useful.

I'm not going to pretend I never learned them.

But I rarely preach the same sermon again.

God has been faithful to show me something new.

Sometimes the emphasis changes.

Sometimes my life has changed.

Sometimes the congregation has changed.

Sometimes the same biblical truth hits me from a completely different direction.

I often tell my people:

“I preach to myself and hope you might be where I am.”

That protects me from standing above the congregation.

I'm not the expert who has arrived to straighten everybody else out.

I'm another person under the Word of God.

If the sermon hasn't spoken to me, I'm not sure I'm ready to preach it to you.

Inspiration and Perspiration

Research matters.

I research every sermon.

I want to understand the text.

I want to know the background.

I want to handle Scripture responsibly.

But my preaching probably leans more heavily toward inspiration than perspiration.

That's just how God made me.

My brother is also a pastor, and he is one of the most well-read people I know. He loves research. He reads widely on all kinds of subjects.

God uses that.

I'm different.

I research, but somewhere along the way I'm waiting on the Spirit.

I need that moment when the information becomes a message.

Neither approach makes one preacher more spiritual than another.

God uses different people differently.

But I know myself.

I am completely dependent on the Holy Spirit.

Was It Any Good?

Then Sunday comes.

I preach.

Sometimes I think it went well.

Sometimes I don't.

I'm probably a much tougher critic of my preaching than anybody sitting in the congregation.

Normally on Monday morning, I allow myself to watch the sermon.

Once.

That's enough.

More than that probably isn't healthy for me.

I'm watching for things I can improve.

Did I use the same phrase twelve times?

Am I making some distracting motion with my hands?

Did something sound different out loud than it did in my head?

I want to become a better communicator.

But eventually I have to let the sermon go.

It was preached.

God can use it however He chooses.

And then, unfortunately, another Sunday is coming.

I Don't Think I've Ever Preached the Wrong Sermon

When asked how I know I'm preaching the wrong sermon, I have trouble answering.

I honestly don't believe that in nearly thirty years I've ever knowingly gone to the pulpit with what I believed was the wrong sermon.

That doesn't mean I've preached thirty years of great sermons.

Absolutely not.

I've preached some clunkers.

There have probably been Sundays when the congregation was wondering how much longer I planned to talk.

But I work and pray until I have peace.

I don't need to know the sermon will be brilliant.

I don't need to know everybody will like it.

I don't need to know how people will respond.

I need to know one thing:

Is this what I believe God has asked me to preach?

When the Spirit gives me that assurance, I'm ready.

The Word for the People

That's what preaching from the prayer closet means to me.

Plan ahead.

Use a calendar.

Study the text.

Do the research.

Learn from what you've preached before.

Pay attention to the people God has given you.

But pray.

And pray some more.

Don't settle merely because you have enough material to fill thirty minutes.

Stay with God until information becomes proclamation.

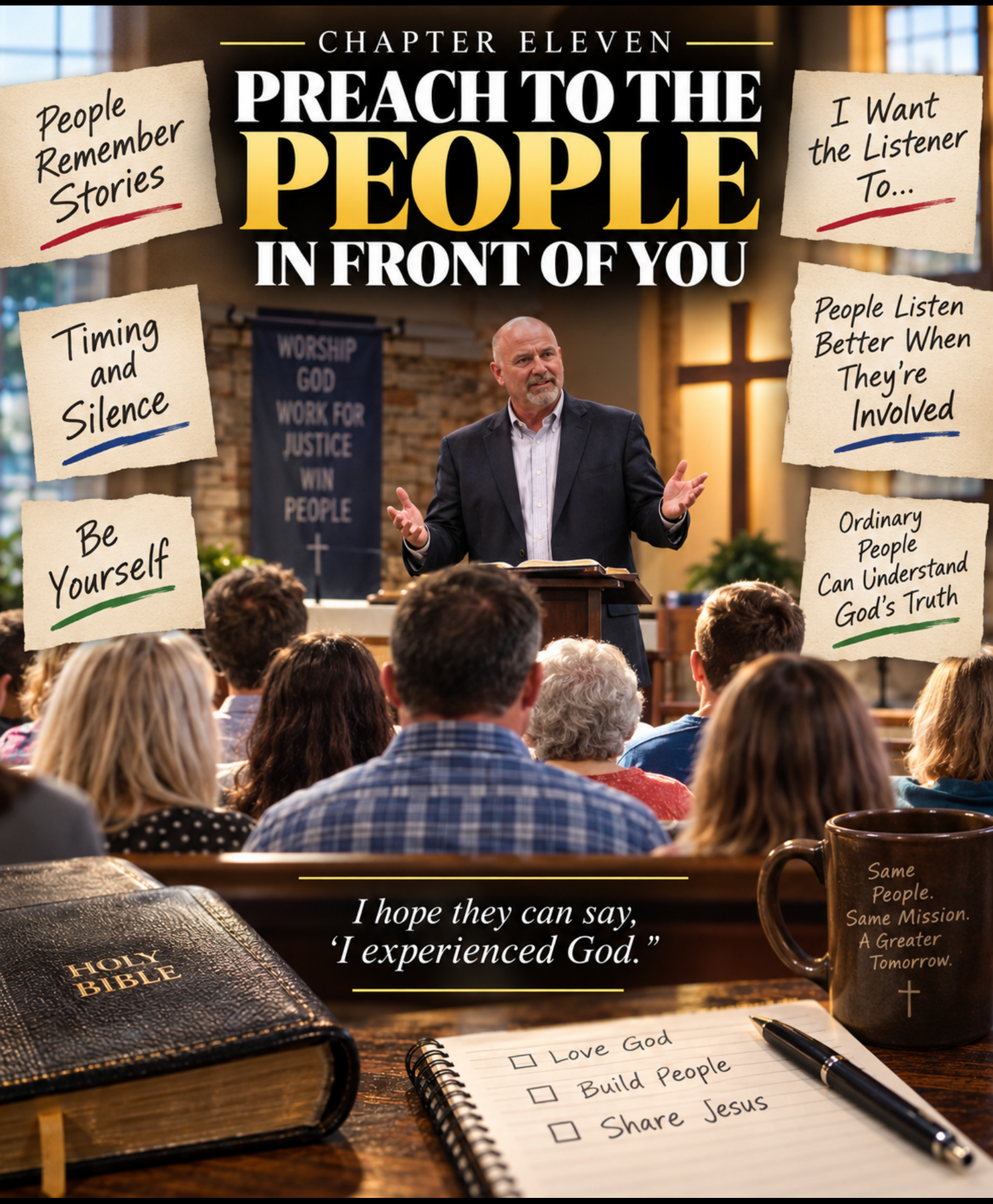
Stay with the text until you sense that *oughtness*.

Then walk into the pulpit believing that, imperfect as you are, God has given you something to say.

The Word of God.

For the people of God.

And then preach it.


CHAPTER ELEVEN
PREACH TO THE PEOPLE IN FRONT OF YOU
People Remember Stories
I Want the Listener To...
Timing and Silence
People Listen Better When They're Involved
Be Yourself
Ordinary People Can Understand God's Truth
WORSHIP GOD WORK FOR JUSTICE WIN PEOPLE
I hope they can say, 'I experienced God."
HOLY BIBLE
Same People. Same Mission. A Greater Tomorrow.
Love God
Build People
Share Jesus

Chapter 11

Preach to the People in Front of You

I don't picture people's faces while I'm preparing a sermon.

That may sound strange for a chapter called *Preach to the People in Front of You.*

But I've learned something.

If you prepare a sermon with one particular person in mind, there's a pretty good chance that will be the Sunday they decide not to come.

Then you're disappointed.

Worse than that, you can begin preparing sermons for individuals rather than preaching the Word of God to the congregation.

So I try to keep particular faces out of my mind.

But I never forget what kind of people will be sitting in front of me.

They're ordinary people.

So am I.

And I want to preach so ordinary people can understand.

Maybe I Make It Too Simple

One criticism of my preaching that is probably correct is that I sometimes make things too simple.

I'm okay with that.

I love theology.

I enjoy reading deeper theological discussions. I like wrestling with difficult biblical and theological ideas.

But when I preach them, I want anybody sitting in the sanctuary to understand them.

My vocabulary isn't expansive.

It certainly isn't expansive when I'm not preaching.

So I try to preach pretty much the way I would talk to somebody one-on-one.

I don't want to become a different person because I walked behind a pulpit.

I think Jesus modeled this.

Nobody could go deeper theologically than Jesus.

But He talked about seeds.

Sheep.

Bread.

Coins.

Birds.

Farmers.

Fathers and sons.

Jesus could have impressed everybody with what He knew.

Instead, He helped ordinary people understand God.

That's a pretty good preaching model.

God Laughs

I use humor when I preach.

Why?

Because I think God laughs a lot.

At least I believe He does.

Chuck Swindoll once talked about someone telling him that what they loved most about his preaching was his laugh.

I understand that.

My life is filled with laughter.

As I've said before, I think people who really know God tend to laugh a lot.

They don't have to control everything.

They don't have to prove everything.

They can enjoy life.

So naturally, laughter finds its way into my sermons.

But I'm not an entertainer.

I don't want twenty minutes of comedy followed by ten minutes of Bible.

Humor should serve the message.

Usually, a short moment is enough.

But I've noticed something.

People remember when you make them laugh.

So if laughter opens the door for them to hear truth, I'll laugh with them.

Laugh at Yourself

Most of the time, the easiest person for me to make fun of is me.

There's plenty of material.

I think pastoring from the prayer closet gives you a healthy self-image.

I know who I am in Christ.

I don't lack confidence.

I believe God has called me.

I believe He uses me.

Because of that, I don't have to spend much energy convincing everybody that I'm impressive.

I can laugh at myself.

Hopefully, self-deprecating humor lets people know:

I'm just like you.

In most cases, probably worse.

The pulpit can create distance between a pastor and his people.

Humility and laughter can shorten that distance.

People Remember Stories

I wish people remembered my sermon points as well as they remember my stories.

They don't.

People remember stories.

Kristi sometimes says I look at things a little differently from other people.

She's probably right.

I notice things.

I make strange connections.

Sometimes I don't even know where they come from.

Years ago, I was at a prayer conference for pastors. We were asked to complete this sentence:

“God is…”

When my turn came, I said:

“Quiet.”

Where in the world did that come from?

But several pastors immediately responded to it.

They understood.

God often works quietly.

God often speaks quietly.

God doesn't always explain Himself.

One simple word opened a much larger conversation.

That's how illustrations often work for me.

I notice something in everyday life and somehow it connects with spiritual truth.

Again, Jesus did that constantly.

Most of His illustrations came from everyday life.

I guess He could have quoted Plato or one of the famous rabbis.

Instead, He talked about somebody losing a coin.

I can work with that.

Some Stories Don't Belong to the Preacher

Pastors are given access to people's lives that few other people receive.

That's sacred.

People tell us things they may have never told another person.

They trust us with marriages, failures, fears, sins, family problems, addictions, disappointments, and secrets.

Those are not sermon illustrations.

When somebody comes to talk with me pastorally, I want them to know:

You will not hear this conversation in a sermon.

I've heard some unbelievable stories during nearly thirty years of ministry.

Some would make incredible sermon illustrations.

They will never become sermon illustrations.

The story isn't mine.

The trust matters more than the illustration.

When I use a church member in a sermon in a harmless story, I normally try to give them a heads-up beforehand.

I also try to get the details right.

If the story happened a certain way, tell it that way.

There are a few people close enough to me that the rules are a little different.

Regina's husband, Curtis, is one of my dear golfing buddies.

I reserve certain privileges there.

He knew the risks when he started playing golf with a preacher.

I Want the Listener To...

One of the most practical things I learned in preaching class was to finish this sentence:

“I want the listener to...”

I still do it.

That sentence forces me to answer an important question:

What do I want these people to do because they heard this sermon?

Not just:

What do I want them to know?

What do I want them to do?

It also helps me narrow the sermon.

I believe a sermon should have one main point.

One.

Preachers can discover twelve wonderful truths in a biblical passage.

That's great.

Maybe you just discovered a twelve-week sermon series.

But people need to know what you're asking them to carry home this Sunday.

“I want the listener to...”

Finish that sentence.

Then build the sermon toward it.

Don't Assume They Know the Story

Church people sometimes forget how strange church can sound to somebody who hasn't been around it.

We say:

“Everybody knows the story of David and Goliath.”

No, they don't.

“Everybody knows about Moses and the Red Sea.”

No, they don't.

Surely everybody knows about the birth of Jesus.

Don't assume that either.

When I preach, I try to remain aware that somebody may be hearing all of this for the first time.

Maybe they're new to church.

Maybe they're watching online.

Maybe they're a teenager who has been brought to church but hasn't paid much attention before.

Maybe they're an adult who has never opened a Bible.

I don't want to embarrass them by making them feel stupid for not knowing something the rest of us assume everybody knows.

Explain it.

The lifelong Christian won't be harmed by hearing it again.

And the new person may finally understand what we're talking about.

It's Not What You Think!

One of the most effective preaching approaches I've used over the years is first-person preaching.

I didn't learn it because I was looking for a preaching technique.

It happened at our first Homecoming after I became pastor at WCFN.

Homecomings are a big deal in the South.

Everybody's relatives come.

Or at least they come for the dinner afterward.

I was the new young preacher, and people who had once attended the church were going to come back to hear me preach.

No pressure there.

We brought in a singer I'd heard about to lead worship.

And God gave me the idea to preach the story of the Prodigal Son from the prodigal's perspective.

I began:

“It's not what you think!”

Then I told the story as though I were the younger son.

I described leaving home.

The far country.

The mistakes.

The pigpen.

The decision to return.

The father running toward me.

The celebration.

And then I ended with something like this:

“I didn't leave because I didn't love Dad. I left because I couldn't stand my brother. But now I'm so glad I came back home.”

I didn't need to explain the application.

Sitting in that sanctuary were people who had once been part of the church but had left.

And some had probably left because of an older brother.

The message went over extremely well.

I learned something.

Stories can carry truth into places explanations sometimes can't reach.

I've continued using first-person sermons through the years.

People love stories.

A first-person sermon simply allows them to experience a biblical story through one person's eyes.

But there still has to be gospel truth.

The story isn't the destination.

The story carries us to the truth.

Let Them Participate

My preaching has continued to change.

More than a decade ago, I began learning about participatory preaching.

Instead of doing all the talking, the preacher asks questions and lets the congregation respond.

I tried it.

I liked it.

More importantly, our people responded to it.

I discovered something pretty simple:

People listen better when they're involved.

Participatory preaching can be unpredictable, of course.

Once, a leading advocate of participatory preaching spoke to South Carolina Nazarene pastors. During the question-and-response time, I asked how a preacher should handle it when a congregational response turns into partisan politics.

My question apparently frustrated the speaker more than I intended.

But it was a genuine question because open participation means somebody may occasionally take the conversation somewhere the preacher doesn't want it to go.

My response in our congregation is simple.

I remind everyone that we keep partisan politics out of our church discussions, and then we move on.

Participation doesn't mean surrendering pastoral leadership.

It means giving people an opportunity to engage with the Word rather than merely listening to me talk about it.

Timing and Silence

One thing I hope has improved in my preaching over thirty years is timing.

That mostly comes from experience.

Young preachers can be afraid of silence.

We think every second has to be filled with words.

It doesn't.

Sometimes the best thing you can do after saying something important is stop talking.

Let it sit there.

Let people think.

Let the Holy Spirit work.

Timing is difficult to teach from a textbook.

You learn it by preaching.

And preaching.

And preaching some more.

Eventually you begin to sense when to move, when to stop, when to laugh, when to lower your voice, and when to let the room become quiet.

Silence can preach too.

More Stories, More Grace

My sermons have changed in other ways.

I'm trying to make them shorter.

I often fail.

There are probably more stories now.

And there is definitely more grace.

I hope thirty years of walking with Jesus has made me a more gracious preacher.

The longer I pastor people, the more I understand how complicated people's lives can be.

The longer I know myself, the less interested I am in standing above anybody.

Truth hasn't changed.

Sin hasn't stopped being sin.

The gospel hasn't changed.

But hopefully I have learned to preach truth with the heart of someone who knows how desperately he needs grace too.

Be Yourself

I think one of the biggest mistakes a preacher can make when trying to connect with people is becoming somebody he isn't.

You hear a great preacher.

You admire the way he talks.

You like his phrases.

You like his delivery.

And before long, you're trying to sound like him.

Don't.

God already has him.

For reasons known only to God, He called you.

I have never felt much need to impress people when I preach.

There is really only One Person I'm interested in pleasing.

That gives me freedom.

I can be myself in the pulpit.

As scary as that may be.

I can laugh.

I can admit I don't know something.

I can tell a story where I'm the fool.

I can be quiet.

I can ask the congregation a question and wait for an answer.

I can preach the way I talk.

The biggest mistake a preacher can make while trying to connect with people is to be someone he is not.

Preach to the People God Gave You

Don't preach to the congregation you wish you had.

Don't preach to the congregation at the famous church whose podcast you listened to this week.

Don't preach to your seminary professor.

Don't preach to other pastors.

And don't preach to one particular person you're trying to straighten out.

Preach to the people God has placed in front of you.

Make deep things understandable.

Tell stories.

Laugh.

Let them participate.

Explain things church people assume everybody knows.

Give them one truth they can carry home.

Tell them what you want the listener to do.

Protect the stories people have trusted you with.

Be yourself.

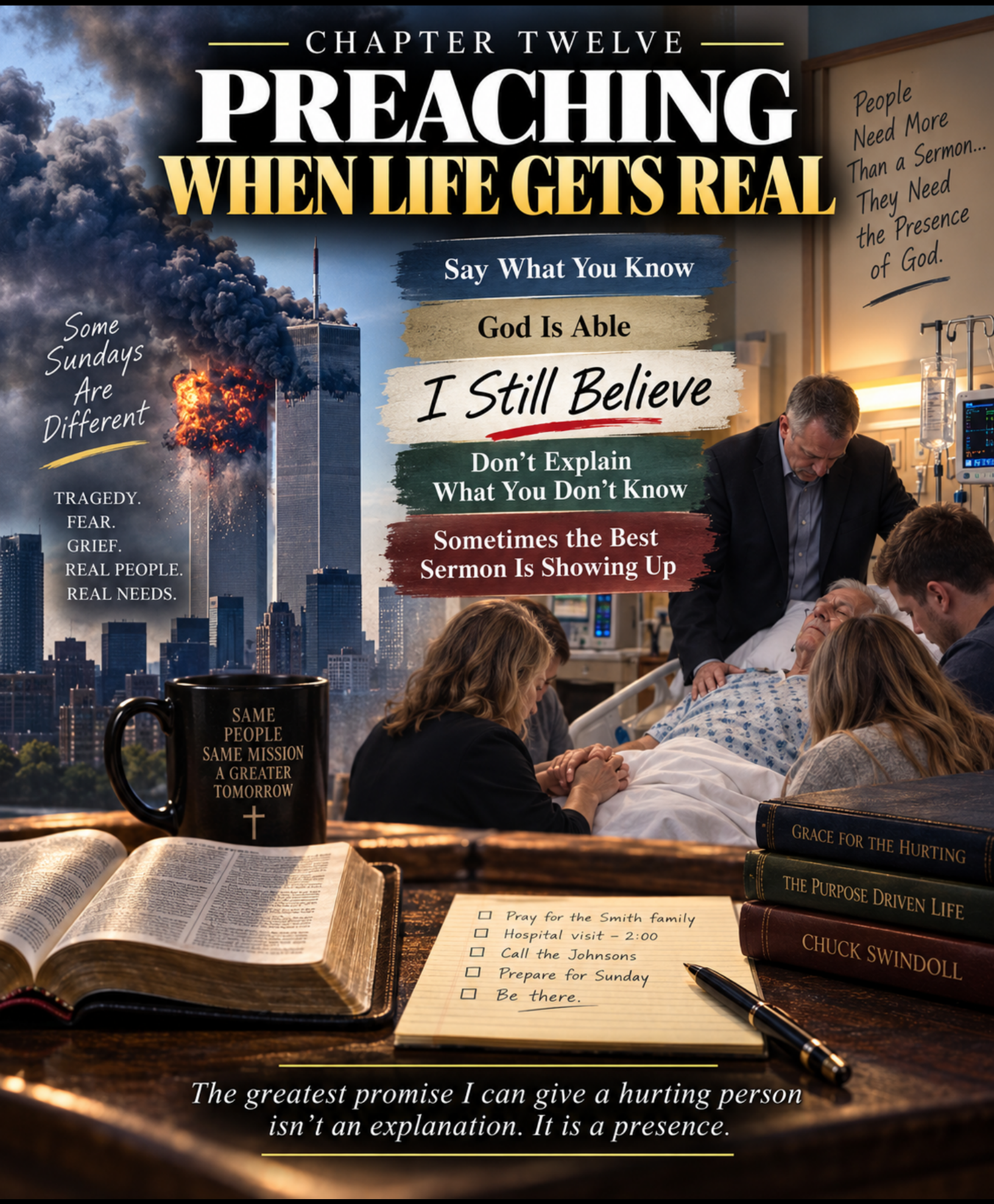
And give the Holy Spirit room to work.

Because when people leave church on Sunday, my greatest hope isn't that they say:

“Pastor Bill preached a great sermon.”

I hope they can say something much more important:

“I experienced God.”


CHAPTER TWELVE
PREACHING
WHEN LIFE GETS REAL
People Need More Than a Sermon... They Need the Presence of God.
Say What You Know
God Is Able
I Still Believe
Don't Explain What You Don't Know
Sometimes the Best Sermon Is Showing Up
Some Sundays Are Different
TRAGEDY.
FEAR.
GRIEF.
REAL PEOPLE.
REAL NEEDS.
SAME PEOPLE
SAME MISSION
A GREATER TOMORROW
GRACE FOR THE HURTING
THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE
CHUCK SWINDOLL
Pray for the Smith family
Hospital visit – 2:00
Call the Johnsons
Prepare for Sunday
Be there.
The greatest promise I can give a hurting person isn't an explanation. It is a presence.

Chapter 12

Preaching When Life Gets Real

There are Sundays when nobody cares about your sermon outline.

Something has happened.

Someone has died.

The diagnosis came back.

A marriage has fallen apart.

A child is in trouble.

A tragedy has shaken the community.

The people sitting in front of you don't need three clever points and a funny illustration.

They need God.

After nearly thirty years of walking with people through some of the worst moments of their lives, I've learned something about preaching when life gets real.

When people are hurting, they don't need their pastor to preach.

They need their pastor to help them experience the presence of God.

Sometimes that involves a sermon.

Sometimes it doesn't.

Some Sundays Are Different

I am writing these words on the twenty-fifth anniversary of September 11, 2001.

Nobody preached a normal sermon the Sunday after 9/11.

How could you?

The entire nation had experienced something horrifying.

People came to church afraid, confused, angry, grieving, and wondering what was going to happen next.

There are moments when what has happened outside the church building is so significant that the preacher cannot pretend it hasn't happened.

But I am more cautious when the tragedy involves an individual family in the congregation.

If someone receives a terrible diagnosis on Friday, I don't normally throw away Sunday's sermon and build the entire service around that diagnosis.

Part of the reason is pastoral fairness.

Other people are hurting too.

Another person will eventually receive a frightening diagnosis.

Another family will experience a death.

Another marriage will struggle.

If I completely rearrange worship around one family's crisis, what happens when I don't do the same thing for the next family?

So normally, I acknowledge what has happened.

We pray.

We love the family.

We show up.

And I preach the Word God has already given me.

But there have been exceptions.

The Sunday I Couldn't Pray

One of those exceptions came when my mother was diagnosed with liver cancer following colon surgery.

I had been in Ohio with my family.

I returned home on Saturday.

I cried most of the way.

The next morning, I was supposed to pastor my church.

There was only one problem.

I could barely talk about what was happening without breaking down.

I had someone else lead the pastoral prayer because I knew I couldn't do it.

During that prayer, Kristi and I went to the altar.

And I cried.

A lot.

I remember thinking later that if a guest had walked into church that morning without knowing what was happening, they probably thought their pastor had confessed to an affair and our whole life was falling apart.

It wasn't exactly the image of strong pastoral leadership.

But it was real.

That morning I spoke from my heart about what I was going through.

There was still a biblical text.

There was still Scripture.

But I wasn't standing above my people telling them how Christians are supposed to handle suffering.

I was standing among them trying to trust God while my own heart was breaking.

Sometimes the congregation needs to see that their pastor needs God too.

God Should Have Healed My Mom

I believe God heals.

I believe we should pray for healing.

I believe Jesus calls us to have faith.

I have stood beside hospital beds and asked God boldly to heal people.

I will continue doing that.

But I have also prayed for people who died.

My mother is one of them.

If you ask me emotionally, God should have healed my mom.

She was such a good person.

She loved God.

She loved us kids so much.

We prayed.

And God didn't heal her the way I wanted Him to.

I don't have an explanation for that.

I could give theological answers.

I could talk about living in a fallen world.

I could talk about death eventually coming to all of us.

Those things are true.

But none of them completely answers the question a grieving son is really asking:

“Why didn't God heal my mom?”

I don't know.

And after nearly thirty years of ministry, I am increasingly comfortable saying:

“I don't know.”

Say What You Know

Not knowing why doesn't mean I know nothing.

There are some things I know.

God is love.

God is faithful.

God is good.

God cares.

Those truths don't answer every question.

But they give me somewhere to stand when I don't have the answers.

Pastors can get themselves in trouble when they think their responsibility is to explain God.

Sometimes we can't.

Sometimes there is no explanation that will make the hospital room feel better.

That's when we need to stop explaining what we don't know and start proclaiming what we do know.

God loves you.

God has not abandoned you.

God cares about your pain.

God is here.

I can promise hurting people that.

Don't Tell Them You Know How They Feel

One thing hurting people don't need is for me to tell them:

“I know what you're going through.”

I don't.

Even if I've experienced something similar, I still don't know exactly what they're going through.

My grief is mine.

Their grief is theirs.

My relationship with my mother was unique.

Their relationship with the person they lost is unique.

Their fears are unique.

Their family is unique.

Their situation is unique.

I can understand some of it.

I can sympathize.

I can hurt with them.

But I don't need to pretend I know exactly how they feel.

I'd rather help them experience the presence of the One who actually does know.

Our God Is Able

Not long after I came to WCFN, a man in our church went into the hospital for exploratory surgery.

The surgery ended much sooner than expected.

I learned something through the years about surgery.

When the doctor comes to get the family much earlier than expected, that isn't always good news.

It wasn't.

He was full of cancer.

The family asked the doctor whether he had told the patient.

The doctor said he had.

We reminded him that patients coming out of surgery don't always remember what doctors tell them.

He said he would return the next morning and explain everything.

So the next morning, the room was filled with family.

And me.

We waited for the doctor.

He came in.

And for whatever reason, he couldn't bring himself to tell this man that he was dying of cancer.

He basically told him he could go home.

Then he left.

The family stood there stunned.

Eventually they pulled me aside.

“Pastor, will you tell Daddy?”

There are things they don't teach you in seminary.

That was one of them.

What was I supposed to say?

God brought to my mind three young men standing before a king and facing a fiery furnace.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego believed God could rescue them.

Their words in Daniel 3 have helped me through many difficult moments since then.

In essence they said:

Our God is able to deliver us. But even if He doesn't, we will still trust Him.

That's faith.

Faith isn't pretending the furnace isn't hot.

Faith isn't promising that God will always do what we desperately want Him to do.

Faith says:

“I know God can.”

And then, with trembling hands sometimes:

“But even if He doesn't, He is still God.”

That passage has become an old friend.

God Is for Us

Romans 8 is another old friend.

When I don't know what to say, I return there.

If God is for us, who can be against us?

And then Paul begins naming all the things that cannot separate us from God's love.

Trouble can't.

Hardship can't.

Persecution can't.

Danger can't.

And ultimately, not even death can.

That's what hurting people need.

Not a preacher pretending he can explain everything.

They need something solid enough to stand on while everything around them is shaking.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Cancer can't.

Grief can't.

A hospital room can't.

A cemetery can't.

Death can't.

That's worth preaching.

Preach Healing Without Pretending

I don't want the fact that some people aren't healed to cause me to stop praying for healing.

Jesus taught us to believe.

So I believe.

I pray boldly.

I ask God to heal.

But I leave the answer in His hands.

That's an important distinction.

Faith doesn't require me to pretend I know what God is going to do.

Faith requires me to trust God with what He decides to do.

There have been good people who prayed good prayers with great faith who did not receive the answer they wanted.

I don't know why.

I'm not going to create an explanation just because I'm uncomfortable with mystery.

Our God is able.

But even if He doesn't...

I still believe.

The Hardest Funeral

The hardest sermon for me to preach is a funeral where the person's eternal destination is uncertain.

When someone has clearly lived their life trusting Jesus, the funeral has grief, but it also has tremendous hope.

We grieve.

But we know where they are.

That's why I so often return to Jesus' words to the thief on the cross:

“Today you will be with me in paradise.”

I love the immediacy of that promise.

With Jesus.

Today.

But not every funeral gives the pastor that assurance.

I've preached funerals where I simply didn't know.

That's difficult.

I won't preach someone into heaven just to make everybody feel better.

But I don't believe a funeral is the time to preach someone into hell either.

My responsibility is to be truthful.

To be gracious.

To comfort the family.

And to point everyone in the room toward Jesus.

When I don't know someone's eternal destination, I know something about the people sitting in front of me.

They're still here.

They can still respond to grace.

So I preach Christ.

Don't Use Pain for Your Agenda

Churches hurt too.

People leave.

Attendance declines.

Conflict develops.

People say things.

Sometimes they say things about the pastor.

Those Sundays can be dangerous.

The preacher has a microphone.

Everybody else has to sit there and listen.

That's a terrible opportunity for revenge.

The protection for me is the same protection I've depended upon throughout my ministry:

Preach the Word and listen to the Spirit.

If I stay faithful to the biblical text and seek the Spirit's direction, it helps keep Pastor Bill's agenda out of the pulpit.

I'm particularly sensitive about that.

I don't want people wondering:

“Is he preaching this because he's mad about what happened at the board meeting?”

“Is this about the family that left?”

“Is Pastor trying to settle a score?”

The pulpit is too sacred for that.

My pain doesn't give me permission to misuse God's Word.

Sometimes the Pastor Cries

I don't cry very often.

At least I haven't for most of my life.

I normally hold myself together pretty well.

But I'm finding that I cry more as I get older.

I'm getting soft.

Maybe that's not such a bad thing.

There have been times when my congregation has seen me hurt.

The Sunday after my mother's diagnosis was certainly one of them.

I don't think pastors need to manufacture emotion.

And I don't think tears make a sermon more spiritual.

But neither do I think pastors have to pretend they're untouched by pain.

We're people too.

Sometimes the pastor needs the altar.

Sometimes the pastor needs prayer.

Sometimes the pastor cries.

And sometimes allowing the congregation to see that reminds them that we're all depending on the same Jesus.

They Will Remember That You Were There

Here's what I've learned after nearly thirty years of walking with people through suffering:

They will remember that I was there far more than they will remember what I said.

That takes us back to the ministry of showing up.

I've preached a lot of funeral sermons.

I've prayed in a lot of hospital rooms.

I've sat with families waiting for doctors.

I've stood beside people when they received terrible news.

I can't remember everything I said.

Neither can they.

But they remember that their pastor came.

Maybe that's why, when people are hurting, they don't really need their pastor to preach.

They need him to be their pastor.

Be there.

Listen.

Read Scripture.

Pray.

Cry if you need to.

Don't explain what you don't know.

Don't promise what God hasn't promised.

Tell them what you do know.

God is good.

God is faithful.

God loves them.

God cares.

God is able.

And when He doesn't do what we desperately wanted Him to do, hold onto Him anyway.

I'm not very good at fixing things.

I've mentioned that before.

But my big brother Jesus is.

So when life gets real, I don't have to walk into the room with all the answers.

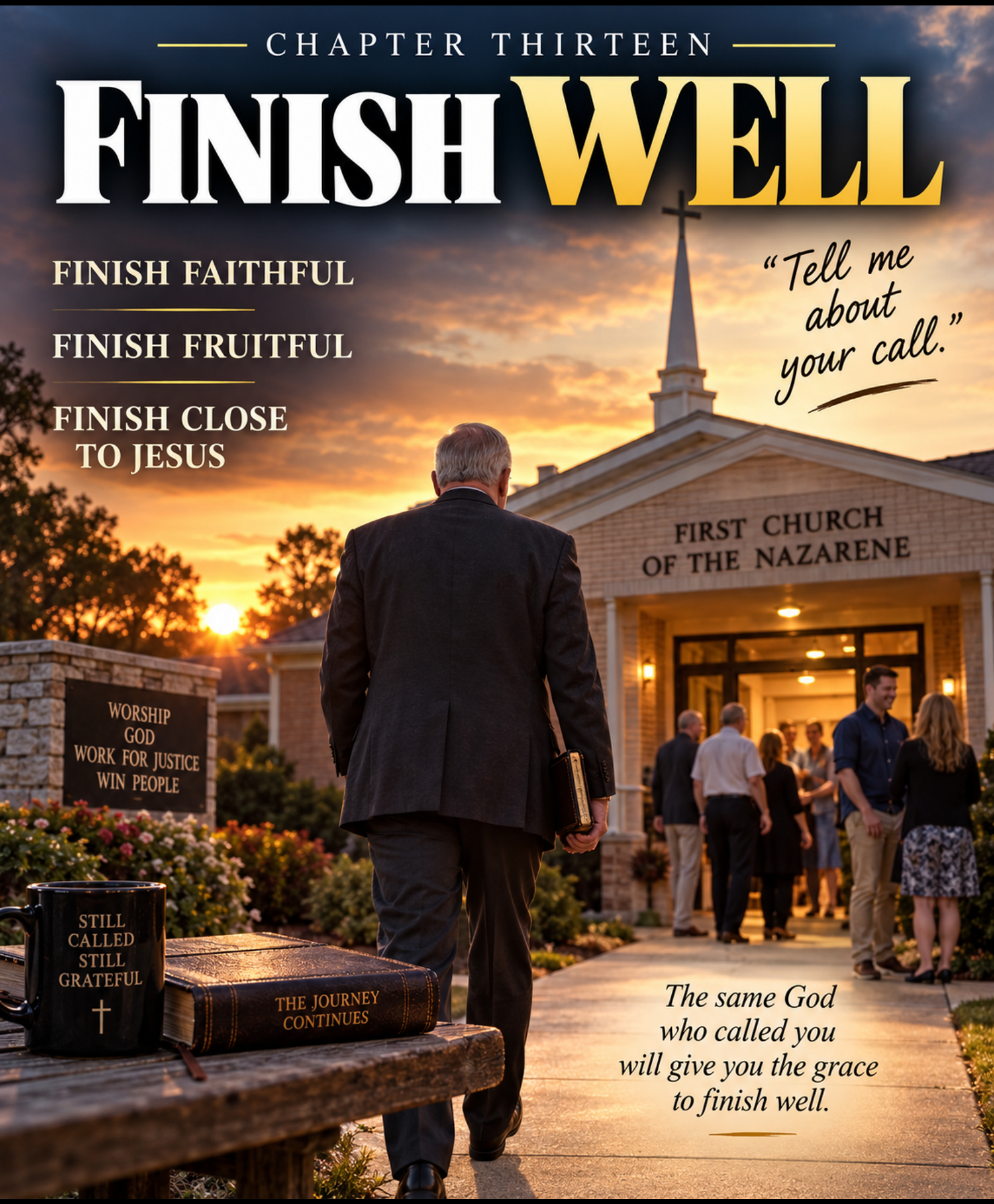
I just want to help people find Him.

Because in the end, the greatest promise I can give a hurting person isn't an explanation.

It is a presence.

God cares.

And sometimes the best sermon a pastor will ever preach is simply showing up.


CHAPTER THIRTEEN
FINISH WELL
FINISH FAITHFUL
FINISH FRUITFUL
FINISH CLOSE TO JESUS
"Tell me about your call."
FIRST CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE
WORSHIP
GOD
WORK FOR JUSTICE
WIN PEOPLE
STILL CALLED STILL GRATEFUL
THE JOURNEY CONTINUES
The same God who called you will give you the grace to finish well.

Chapter 13

Finish Well

I still love being a pastor.

After nearly thirty years at the same church, I can honestly say that.

I love it.

Pastoring isn't simply something I do.

It's who I am.

I can't imagine doing anything else.

And I hope the best is still yet to come.

I've been around pastors who were exhausted.

I've listened to stories of church fights, difficult boards, impossible people, and painful ministry experiences.

I've had painful experiences too.

But ministry is not awful when people are getting saved and growing in their faith.

That's why we're here.

We are supposed to reach people and make disciples.

When that remains the focus, ministry is still an incredible privilege.

Go Where the Fish Are Biting

One of the most heartbreaking parts of ministry is watching someone walk away from God.

I've watched people who knew better make terrible decisions.

I've watched people walk away from grace.

I've watched people leave the church.

I've watched from a distance as lives began falling apart.

That hurts me more than criticism ever has.

God wants something better for them.

I believe the church is one of the places where God's best for their lives can be realized.

So watching them walk away is heartbreaking.

But the pastor cannot live there.

You love them.

You pray for them.

You keep the door open.

You hope they come home.

But eventually you have to move on to where the fish are biting.

Jesus called us fishers of men.

A fisherman can spend all day staring at the spot where the fish used to be.

Or he can move to where the fish are biting now.

There are still people who need Jesus.

There are still people ready to grow.

There are still children who need someone to believe in them.

There are still marriages that can be strengthened.

There are still lost people who can be found.

Don't become so consumed with the people who walked away that you miss the people God is bringing toward you.

I Am His and He Is Mine

People occasionally talk about pastoral burnout.

I understand it.

Ministry can be exhausting.

But I don't think I've experienced much of it.

The primary reason is simple.

I am His and He is mine.

My relationship with God has kept me.

This is His church.

Not mine.

Someday I will be dead and gone, and the church will continue.

That's actually comforting.

I try to give situations to God.

I try to do what He asks me to do.

Then I trust Him with the rest.

Pastoring from the prayer closet has helped me live that way.

If I'm responsible for everything, ministry will crush me.

If I'm responsible for obeying God, I can do that.

Not perfectly.

But I can keep listening.

I can keep praying.

I can keep following.

How can we remain bitter when we're walking closely with God every day?

Marry Well

There's another reason I haven't burned out.

Kristi.

I have an amazing wife.

She's my helpmate.

More importantly, she is godly.

She loves the Lord.

She loves serving Him.

She draws people toward God.

And she draws me toward God too.

If I ever get the privilege of speaking to students preparing for ministry, I might spend an entire lecture on this.

Find the godliest spouse you know.

It would probably help if you're attracted to them too.

I highly recommend that part.

Ministry puts pressure on a marriage.

There will be late nights.

Interrupted meals.

Hospital visits.

Phone calls.

Criticism.

People who love you.

People who don't.

Sundays when you're exhausted.

Seasons when the church needs more than you think you have to give.

Having a spouse who continually points you toward Jesus is an unbelievable gift.

I've said before that your first congregation lives in your house.

I believe that.

And I couldn't have done what I've done without Kristi.

Listen to the Critics

Criticism doesn't bother me as much as it bothers some people.

Part of that is personality.

Part of it is age.

And part of it comes from knowing who I am and who God has called me to be.

But I've learned something about criticism:

There's normally at least a grain of truth in it.

Sometimes there's a lot more than a grain.

Of course, sometimes there's also an angry person with an agenda.

That's ministry.

I actually wish my closest friends would criticize me more.

We need people who love us enough to tell us when we're wrong.

So when criticism comes, I try to take both the critic and the criticism to God.

He's a great counselor.

Ask:

“Lord, is there something here I need to hear?”

If there is, change.

If there isn't, leave it with Him.

You don't have to carry every criticism home.

I Didn't Ask About Your Church

Pastors are funny.

I'll see another pastor and ask:

“How are you doing?”

And he'll say:

“We had 217 Sunday morning. Giving is up. We baptized three people last month. Our youth group is growing.”

I want to say:

“I asked how *you* were doing.”

How's your soul?

How's your marriage?

How are your kids?

Are you enjoying Jesus?

I don't care nearly as much about your church report.

God has the church.

That doesn't mean numbers don't matter.

They do.

I pay attention to pastors and churches that are doing well.

I want to know why.

I want to learn.

And if I'm being truthful, sometimes jealousy shows up.

I take that to God too.

I've seen churches grow faster than ours.

I've seen pastors accomplish things I haven't accomplished.

I'm aware of weaknesses in my own ministry that may have limited our growth.

Maybe God was protecting me from some things too.

I don't know.

But comparison isn't going to help me pastor WCFN.

Learn from other people.

Celebrate what God is doing through them.

Be honest when you're jealous.

Talk to God about it.

Then go back and pastor your people.

Faithful and Fruitful

When I was younger, I probably defined successful ministry mostly by growth.

More people.

Bigger attendance.

More programs.

More activity.

I still believe growth matters.

But Dr. Eddie Estep helped me understand something important.

Successful ministry should be faithful and fruitful.

Both.

We sometimes celebrate pastors simply because they survived.

“They've been there twenty-five years.”

That's wonderful.

But staying isn't the entire calling.

Jesus didn't merely call us to survive.

He called us to bear fruit.

Faithfulness matters.

Did I obey God?

Did I preach the Word?

Did I love the people?

Did I remain faithful to my calling?

But fruitfulness matters too.

Are people coming to Jesus?

Are believers growing?

Are disciples being made?

Are people learning to love God and love others?

Is the church making a difference?

I used to think successful ministry meant growth.

Now I think it means discipleship.

Be faithful.

And ask God to make your faithfulness fruitful.

I Wish I Had Taken More Chances

If I could sit down with the young Pastor Bill who arrived at WCFN, I'd tell him to take more risks.

Challenge the people more.

Focus more intentionally on the things that change lives.

I think there were times when I played it too safe.

There were opportunities I missed.

That hurts when I think about it.

There were too many times I had an opportunity to share my faith and didn't.

Too many opportunities to invite somebody to church that I let pass.

When people became emotional, sometimes I backed away when perhaps I should have moved closer.

Those are regrets.

I can't change them.

But I can learn from them.

And if I'm talking to a younger pastor, I would say:

Take some chances for the Kingdom.

Don't be foolish.

Pray.

Listen.

Seek wisdom.

But don't let fear disguise itself as wisdom.

Sometimes faith requires taking a chance.

Don't Change This

There is one thing I would tell young Pastor Bill not to change.

Stay grounded in the Lord.

Don't change that.

Methods will change.

Music will change.

Technology will change.

People will change.

Culture will change.

Your preaching will change.

Your church will change.

You will change.

But stay close to Jesus.

That's the foundation underneath everything else in this book.

Older and More Passionate

Getting older has changed me.

I think I'm more relaxed.

Small things don't bother me nearly as much.

Things that might have kept me awake years ago don't seem quite as important anymore.

I've seen God handle too many things.

But strangely enough, while I've become more relaxed, I've also become more passionate.

I'm aware that I have fewer years ahead of me in pastoral ministry than behind me.

I want them to count.

I desperately want these last years to be effective.

I still love almost every part of the job.

There are exceptions.

I don't enjoy deciding which benevolence needs the church should pay.

And I don't like fundraisers.

Never have.

Never will.

Thirty years of spiritual maturity haven't fixed that.

But I still love pastoring.

I still love preaching.

I still love seeing somebody come to Jesus.

I still love watching people grow.

I still love the church.

I still can't believe I get to do this.

WCFN Without Me

Occasionally I think about WCFN having another pastor.

They will.

I hope I've prepared them for that.

Sometimes I wonder if I've spoiled them a little.

I have a strong work ethic.

I've tried to be disciplined with church finances.

A future pastor may do things differently.

That's okay.

Hopefully the greatest thing I've helped build isn't a system that depends upon Pastor Bill.

Hopefully I've helped develop people who love God and love others.

Because those people can continue the ministry after I'm gone.

The church should never depend upon the pastor.

It belongs to Jesus.

If WCFN needs me in order to survive, then I've failed to prepare it for the future.

But if people continue worshiping God, loving one another, reaching people and making disciples long after I'm gone, I'll be thrilled.

What I Hope My Family Says

I've thought about what I hope the church says about me.

But what my family says matters more.

I hope they say:

“Dad loved us with everything he had.”

They'll probably also say:

“He was crazy.”

I'm okay with that.

I hope they always knew I loved them.

I hope they say I loved God.

I hope they say I loved the church.

I hope they say I was willing to do whatever I could to reach people.

Mostly, I hope they say:

“He had a good heart.”

There are bigger accomplishments a pastor could put on a résumé.

I don't know that there are many better things his family could put on his tombstone.

Stay Connected to the Vine

What makes a pastor quit too soon?

There are probably many answers.

Conflict.

Disappointment.

Comparison.

Exhaustion.

Criticism.

Failure.

But underneath many of them, I think there is a greater danger:

Drifting away from God.

Jesus told us to remain in the vine.

Branches don't produce fruit by trying harder.

They produce fruit by staying connected.

That's ministry.

Stay connected to Jesus.

It always produces fruit.

Maybe not the fruit you expected.

Maybe not on your timetable.

Maybe not in numbers somebody will publish in a denominational report.

But stay connected.

The thing that has kept me going isn't my personality.

It isn't my work ethic.

It isn't a ministry strategy.

It isn't even WCFN.

The thing that has kept me going is my relationship with God.

Which, after thirteen chapters, brings us right back to where we started.

The prayer closet.

Tell Me About Your Call

Suppose a young pastor calls me on Monday morning.

Sunday was awful.

Attendance was down.

The sermon bombed.

Somebody complained.

A family he loves told him they're leaving.

He's tired.

Embarrassed.

Discouraged.

And he says:

“Pastor Bill, I don't think I'm very good at this. Maybe I should quit.”

I think I know what I'd say.

“Tell me about your call.”

Tell me about the moment you knew.

Tell me about when God began dealing with your heart.

Tell me why you went into ministry in the first place.

Tell me about the day when somewhere deep inside you became convinced:

God wants me to preach.

Go back there.

Before the church board.

Before the attendance reports.

Before the criticism.

Before the budgets.

Before the programs.

Before anybody knew your name.

There was God.

And there was you.

And there was a call.

Tell me about it.

Because if God called you, one terrible Sunday doesn't uncall you.

One critic doesn't uncall you.

One family leaving doesn't uncall you.

One sermon that fell flat doesn't uncall you.

Go back to your call.

Then go back to the prayer closet.

Get alone with the One who called you.

Tell Him you're tired.

Tell Him you're hurt.

Tell Him you're disappointed.

Tell Him you're wondering whether you're any good at this.

He already knows.

Listen.

And if He still says:

“This is what I called you to do,”

then get up.

Love your family.

Love your people.

Preach the Word.

Reach somebody.

Make a disciple.

And next Sunday, do it again.

Because you don't have to finish famous.

You don't have to finish with the biggest church.

You don't have to finish with everybody applauding.

But by the grace of God:

Finish faithful.

Finish fruitful.

And finish close to Jesus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Harmon has served as pastor of West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene in West Columbia, South Carolina, since 1997. For nearly three decades, his ministry has been shaped by a simple conviction: before a pastor can effectively minister to people, he must first bring those people before God.

Bill's pastoral philosophy grew out of the prayer closet. Several mornings each week, he prays through the names of the families connected to his congregation, asking God to work in their lives - and listening for how God might want their pastor to respond.

Bill is passionate about reaching people for Christ and helping believers become disciples. He believes ministry should be faithful and fruitful, that pastors should love the people God has given them, and that the church belongs to Jesus - not to the pastor.

Bill and his wife, Kristi, have served together throughout his ministry. He considers her godly influence, encouragement, and love for people one of God's greatest gifts to both his life and ministry.

When he isn't preaching, visiting, or writing sermons, Bill can often be found playing golf, pickleball, softball, or enjoying time with his family.

"I love it. It is not just a calling. It is who I am. I am a pastor, and I always will be one."

MORE FROM BILL HARMON

A Day in the Life of Jesus
First-person sermons retelling moments from the life of Jesus through the eyes of those who experienced them.
Google Drive link supplied in shortened form - full link can be added when available.

Give Them a Word
The expanded version of the annual-theme philosophy introduced in Chapter Six.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/15aak-6ONQnw3N6Wei52qNwAusWDtC__6/view?usp=sharing

What Is God Like? - For Your Enjoyment
A collection of sermons and devotional material.
Google Drive link supplied in shortened form - full link can be added when available.

The best is still yet to come.