

Chapter One



Spiritually Bankrupt

“Throwing in the Towel”

Twenty years of full time preaching left me empty. I was as spiritually bankrupt as I was financially destitute. Somehow in my church rearing, somehow in my training to preach, somehow in my own personal life, I had not learned the importance of spiritual things.

As a young boy I had learned what to say in prayers by imitating the older men I heard pray in church services. But I had never really grasped the concept of a personal prayer life. I studied stories that had angels in them, but I failed to look and see what, if anything, they would or could do for me. I read of the gift of the Holy Spirit, but never tried to understand His work. Revelation was presented to me as a difficult book to understand, so I stayed away from it. Heaven was a worthy reward, and I loved to sing the songs about it. Yet, I never deeply studied the topic. Without realizing it, I was stunting my own spiritual growth.

I grew up during a time when the pulpit was a major evangelistic tool. Strong doctrinally-centered preaching converted my parents and brought about a tremendous growth in the church for many years. But

in some ways my Christian rearing lacked balance. Sunday school taught me about Daniel in the lions' den, but never did the thought cross my young mind that I might find my own faith tested in such a dramatic way. Four years of college training in two of our brotherhood's finest preacher training programs had done a wonderful job of getting me through the text of the Bible. While I had memorized hundreds of verses of Scripture, I had failed to grasp the reality of the spiritual world around me those same Scriptures spoke of. As I went out to preach I felt ready to convert the world and I did have much success. People liked my preaching, souls responded to it, and churches did grow. But I encountered problems along the way too.

Much of the blame was my own. Despite years of Bible study I had not developed strong spiritual habits. The world, the family, the saints and the sinners—all put an emotional, financial, and physical strain on me I could no longer handle. Twenty years in God's service had taken me far from God. A spiritual battle I had little knowledge of had left me weak and ineffective in the Lord's work. So I threw in the towel.

I moved my family to Memphis and began to rebuild my life. I went back to school, and began to search for a new career. I went to my classes in the mornings and worked for a hospital in the afternoon. We began to worship at the Highland Street church of Christ, yet I stayed pretty much to myself. A year later I began to work part time at the FedEx hub unloading the large containers of packages as they came off the airplanes. I had never gone to work before in steel toe work boots and often thought of my dad who worked on construction jobs most of his life. Having worked with the deaf for many years during my preaching, I began to pick up interpreting jobs here and there. Although close, I did not complete my degree as I had a family to feed and bills to pay and there seemed to be plenty of work out there waiting for me.

During these years there was an emptiness in me. It is a little hard to explain. Throughout my preaching years I felt like I was doing something important with my life. In my mind at least, my preaching and teaching made a difference. Now, sitting in front of the computer at the hospital or unloading freight at the hub in my steel toe boots, I felt insignificant. I was honored that I had been able to do what I loved, to

preach those many years, but now that it was over I felt like my value to the Lord's church was over as well. I was proud I had been able to preach for twenty years, but now ashamed that I had not been able to continue. I had let down some of the great preachers who had helped me along the way. I was now uncomfortable in the presence of preachers. I was on this earth, but so what? It was a low time in my life.

However, away from the preaching spotlight, my wounded soul began to heal. After a few years I started to teach a Bible class once more, made up of a wonderful group of Christians at Highland Street who encouraged me so much. It felt good to call upon this love of Bible study I had and to share what I had learned with others. Through this great class the wonders of Christianity began to work in my life again. I begin to realize that I could contribute much to the Lord's work outside of a "paid" ministry.

Someone asked me to teach a class on angels. As fate would have it, I had never deeply studied such a topic before. I had been too absorbed in brotherhood issues, Rotary Club meetings, and trying to stretch a dollar. This study awoke me to the spiritual world, and I began to think on a different plane. The Scriptures showed me how God used angels to accomplish His will and answer prayers, and fight spiritual battles for us. I was intrigued. I began to see how the wheels turned in the spiritual realms and what angels do for us today. It was right there in black and white! My appetite for spiritual things was whetted. This class changed my life.

During this time a visiting preacher came to Highland and preached. His lesson had a great impact on me. While I cannot remember his exact words, I do know that what he said attacked that emptiness inside me and made me really want to get back to doing something meaningful with my life. By this time I had gotten into the golf business. I had taken a job with a well known golf pro in our area and was managing a struggling golf course for him. I drove fifty miles one way every morning and worked late, at times staying over and sleeping on the couch in the clubhouse. I enjoyed the solitude of those early morning drives and late evening strolls along the golf course, and I began to feel something stir deep inside me. I found myself praying more, and worshiping with a renewed spirit. A tiny light began to glow inside my

heart. I could only smile and enjoy what was happening as my mind was thinking the unthinkable—I was beginning to long for my first love: *preaching*.

Back In the Saddle

Now all I had to do was find a church that wanted a man who had not preached in nine years, drifted from job to job, never finished his degree, and at the moment worked at a golf course. There were not many takers! I felt like damaged goods, and began to wonder if there was a pulpit anywhere in the area that could use me. I decided I would leave that up to the Lord. *Looking back I felt God had me right were he wanted me. In my weakness he would do great things.* I tried out for a little congregation called Union Chapel, outside of Palmersville, Tennessee but heard nothing from them for a couple of months. I called them again and they invited me back. That Sunday afternoon the men of the church met with me. They liked my preaching and experience but also had some concerns, not the least of which was that I lived a long way from the church building—134.7 miles to be exact! I told them that if I felt this is where the Lord wanted me that the miles would not be a problem. Unlike previous discussions in my younger days, I spoke of my weaknesses, not my strengths, and suggested that we take it one Sunday at a time. They offered me a fair wage for a Sunday's work and I accepted. Driving home that night it is hard to put my feelings into words. "Could I meet their needs?" I wondered. "Could I be effective?" It had been a long nine years, but I would be preaching again each Lord's Day. In the night I drove on, with a smile on my face.

But my spiritual renaissance was not over. The church at Highland Street had a program at the time called "Mission 1000." It was a three month school which was designed to help prepare those who had plans to enter the mission field. It was staffed by old time missionaries, Highland ministers, and a retired air force pilot and chaplain who had taught and baptized the lost around the world and through three wars. I thought this program would be a good way to get my head back in the Book, and be a good start as I returned to the pulpit again. My wife had received a good promotion at the school where she worked with deaf

kids, I found one congregation that agreed to help me with a little monthly support and with my preaching in Palmersville, we would be able to make enough to pay the bills. There was no doubt in my mind that God was bringing all this together to help me get back on track. I was on a spiritual high and it felt good. During these three months, preaching every Sunday and studying God's Word during the week, I had never felt so satisfied about my work in the Lord. The long drive each Sunday to Palmersville seemed to be a time of peaceful reflection. I perfected the ability to drive and pray at the same time.

The Mission 1000 program was a part of the reason I was feeling so close to the Lord. The spiritual men of this program gave me, and many others, a feast. I think they knew that one must have strong spiritual values and habits to make it on the lonely and difficult mission spots around the world. These men taught me how to pray. They showed me what a strong prayer life was really all about, and how to use this powerful tool. It seemed that a combination of events was working in my life.

After graduating from Mission 1000, I began looking for full time work and continued to drive each Sunday to Union Chapel. It took me about two and a half hours to make the drive each Lord's Day morning. I preached two sermons and taught the adult Bible class. Families signed up to feed my wife and me lunch and in the afternoon I would make a visit or two, mostly to sick and shut ins. I would arrive back at the building at 4:00 and have prayer time before our 5:00 evening service. Afterward was the long drive home, usually getting back to Memphis between 8:30 and 9:00 pm. It made for a 14-hour day, but the Lord worked strongly through my preaching and my prayers and exciting things began to happen. One of the ladies started to write the names of those baptized during this time in her Bible. By the time it was all over there were 22 names recorded. Attendance grew from 55 my first Sunday to 80. The first elders and deacons in the little church's forty-year history were appointed. What an exciting day that was! Families became united in Christ. The men built a beautiful fellowship hall with their own hands, and one of the elders paid for all the supplies! A friend's day, a Vacation Bible School, and a family day were all added to our yearly activities. We grew to love each other, oh how we

loved each other. For almost four years the Lord did amazing things with us.

During the years of making this long drive I never had an accident of any kind, never had any car troubles on the road—not even a flat tire! I never had to cancel a Sunday trip because of bad weather or being sick. I was late to services only one time, when a bridge washed out. I felt that the Lord truly watched over me as I made this trip each Lord's Day!

As I write this I have no idea what the Lord's plans are for me. I am just trying to be aware of what doors God is opening. I am patiently waiting for the Lord to show me my next assignment.

Looking Heavenward

During this time of spiritual renewal I have tried to teach and preach much about spiritual things: angels, prayer, the cross and the great lessons of Revelation. I had never taught a series of lessons just about Heaven. Yet this topic has become one of my most enjoyable studies.

These lessons represent my thoughts and meditations about man's journey from earth to eternity. There aren't many footnotes in this work. I have not seen other books about this journey, much less read them. When you are not in full time ministry work you get out of the loop and do not stay up on the latest books and such. It wouldn't have stopped me from writing this anyway. I wanted this to be a journey of thought, and I wanted the reader to think along with me. I recognize that there are a lot of different views held about the topics discussed in this book. I do not claim to hold all wisdom or knowledge on these subjects. However, I have tried to look closely at what the Scriptures say and in doing so hopefully I have been able to throw some light on subjects that have been left in the dark too long.

The best book about Heaven, of course, is the book of Revelation. And it's a gem dandy! The premillennialist preachers over the past hundred years have frightened us away from this great book. The book does not try to tell us about a coming thousand-year reign, or drop clues as to when Jesus is coming back. It does tell of a glorious reward after a difficult life. The best commentary I have read about Revelation is the one by the great Burton Coffman. He was the minister for the

Manhattan Avenue congregation in New York City, where my family and I worshiped when I was a teenager.

However, this is not about what theologians and philosophers think about Heaven. It is about what the Bible tells us about Heaven. This is a Scripture-based work. This author assumes the reader has a strong faith in the inspiration of the Scriptures. It is only through these inspired words that we can know of life in eternity. It would seem to me that any one who sees the Bible as unreliable has no source of learning about life after death. For them death becomes a leap into the dark. I do not know if these writings will help instill a faith in Scripture. For those who do believe in God's Word my prayer is that you will find these writings helpful in developing a stronger understanding of and longing for the Eternal City.

Under the Broom Tree

Perhaps you too are experiencing feelings of spiritual bankruptcy. Or maybe you have neglected serious Bible study for so many years that you now long to learn more about spiritual things. I hope this will be a good starting point for you.

After his great triumph over the idol Baal on Mt. Carmel, and the killing of 450 prophets of Baal, the mighty prophet Elijah found himself on the run. The wicked ruler Ahab and his wife Jezebel had put a death sentence on Elijah. They were not pleased with his triumph over Baal. So he ran for his life. We read, "When he had come to a broom tree he sat down under it and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, Lord,' he said. 'Take my life'" (1 Kings 19:4). After a spiritual high on Mt. Carmel, Elijah descends into a spiritual low under this broom tree. Now I do not know exactly what a "broom tree" is, but I should. I have sat under it a few times myself. All of us have reached points where we have wanted to give up, to proclaim along with Elijah, "I've had enough, Lord."

So the Lord sent an angel to bring Elijah a hot meal and a large glass of water, in order to encourage him to keep going. Elijah got up and went to the mountain of God and continued his great work as God's prophet. Angels will strengthen us too! "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14).

Our faith can be renewed and our zeal can return! *It is my hope that this study of Heaven and eternity can be your “hot meal” to get you back up and going!* It has raised my spirits greatly.

When the writer of Hebrews spoke of the “elementary teachings about Christ,” he mentioned faith, repentance, and baptism. But he also included in that list topics about the hereafter, “the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:1-3). A Christian needs to study all of these topics to have a well-balanced faith.

We will be looking at subjects that will hopefully raise your soul’s curiosity immediately and we will then use that curiosity to enhance your understanding of the spiritual world. Some of the questions we will look at are: Where do we go when we die? Where is Heaven and what about those mansions? What will happen on Judgment Day? Will we recognize each other in Heaven? Are Hades and Hell the same place? How do you get to Heaven? What will we do in Heaven and what kind of new body will we have there? These and many other questions are answered plainly and up front by Jesus and the writers of the New Testament and we will share those answers with you. As Paul said of the hereafter, “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). The more we learn about the hereafter the more we will long for it. The more we long for it the more spiritual we will become. The more spiritual we become the more likely Heaven will be our eternal home.

We must study and talk about this city of pure gold if it is to become a real place to us. We must learn how to pack our bags if we are to make this trip to New Jerusalem. We must stick our heads through the door with John and look at the city four square and know that an amazing experience is waiting for us. Let us begin.

Discussion Questions

Journey back:

1. When in life have you felt like you were making a difference?
2. The chapter is titled “Spiritually Bankrupt.” Have you ever been spiritually bankrupt? What led to this emptiness?
3. The author writes “God had me right where he wanted me. In my weakness he would do great things.” How is God working through your weakness?

Journey in:

4. Read 1 Kings 19.
 - A. What caused Elijah to want to give up?
 - B. God responded to Elijah in at least three ways. What are they?
5. Read Numbers 11.
 - A. Why did Moses want to die? (11:1-15)
 - B. How did God respond to Moses? (11:16-34)

C. What similarities and differences do you observe in Elijah and Moses' distress?

Similarities

Differences

Journey forward:

6. Where are you spiritually on life's journey?

____ Just getting started

____ ready to quit

____ empty

____ renewed and running

____ tired and burdened

____ other

7. Write a prayer giving God your burdens or divide into groups of two or three, then share and pray for each other.