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CHAPTER 1

HELP, I'M STUCK!

I was only twenty-one but already I felt stuck. I lay there on my grandmother's floral-patterned couch as waves of discouragement washed over me. Every bone in my body seemed to ache. I had tried as hard as I knew how, but was tired of spinning my wheels and going nowhere. I wasn't sure I had the energy or even the desire to continue on. There I was, only five months into my ministry, and I was already physically depleted, emotionally discouraged, and spiritually dry. I had to admit it, I was stuck.

My mind raced back.

My second week in Chicago I was awakened at two o'clock in the morning by loud banging noises outside my window. When I peered out I saw a dozen or more young men running down the middle of the street shouting with guns in hand. Another shot rang out. I remember ducking and thinking, *What have I gotten myself into?* It was hard going back to sleep with the adrenaline still pumping. A week later my fiancée (now wife) Dee was waiting for me in her car. As I walked toward her I could tell something was wrong. Just minutes earlier a pregnant sixteen-year-old girl was stabbed in the stomach in

a gang-related incident right in front of Dee. When I opened the car door she was teary eyed and shaking uncontrollably. The puddle of blood on the sidewalk was a grim reminder of the senseless violence that plagued the neighborhood around our church.

The congregation was small, young, and chaotic—to say the least. Our Sunday services were unpredictable, as well. Like the Sunday we had a blind guest speaker and Charlie, the 275-pound neighbor, showed up to our evening worship service a little drunk. That day our ushers must have been distracted, because Charlie made it from the doorway entrance all the way up the aisle and face-to-face with our unsuspecting—and blind—guest speaker. Charlie tried to confiscate the microphone from him, but our ex-convict ushers caught on and quickly subdued Charlie. They promptly escorted him out of the building. Charlie shouted slurred obscenities all the way back down the center aisle and out the door.

GUNS AND GANGBANGERS

One Sunday morning after the service I noticed that people had bottlenecked at our exit doors. Someone came running up to me and said, “Hey, Pastor, we got a situation.” “A situation” around our church was always code for crisis. A man was waving a gun on the street in front of the church entrance. By the time I made it outside, the man had the gun pointed at the head of another terrified man, whom he had pushed up against a parked car. Without thinking I rushed to intervene. I found myself standing in front of an angry gunman with

my little congregation huddled in the entrance of our church building in disbelief at their impulsive young pastor. At that moment the thought crossed my mind that I could have called the police and let them handle it. It was too late for that.

I felt a little like Peter after he jumped out of the boat to walk on the water and realized he needed a life jacket. I mustered up the most pastoral tone my twenty-one-year-old vocal cords could manage and said, “Hey you. I’m the pastor of this church. You’re scaring my people. So put down your gun and let that guy go.”

He looked up at me a little startled. I wasn’t sure if he was about to turn the gun on me or follow my instructions. I could tell he wasn’t sure if he believed me, but after glancing up at the heads poking out of the church entrance he slowly put down his revolver. He tried to convince me that he was on my side, that we were “community partners” and he was just performing a type of community service, getting rid of scum like the guy he was still holding down. I assured him that there were better ways of cleaning up the neighborhood and persuaded him to put away his revolver so our people could get to their cars.

To say that we were attracting “unchurched” people was a bit of an understatement.

One young man who started showing up at our services was a gangbanger from the neighborhood who, because he had been shot in the head, was partially paralyzed. He walked with difficulty and he talked with a slight slur, but his gangbanging attitude was healthy and intact. We started getting complaints from young women in the church that he was sitting

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next to them and whispering obscene comments to them during the service. I approached him one morning to let him know that he was welcome to worship with us, but the next time he started talking dirty to one of our sisters he would be out the door. I alerted

our ex-convict ushers to keep an eye on him.

Sure enough, a couple of weeks later, in the middle of our worship time, I saw him lean over toward a young woman, a Bible-college student. Her face turned red and her jaw dropped. From the front I motioned to our two ushers to deal with him. One of them, a big ex-drug dealer named Jose, made his way down the aisle, leaned over, and had a talk with the young man. The conversation was tense. Our gangbanger friend wrapped his legs around his chair and grabbed on to his seat with a look of defiance. The next thing I saw was two big ushers carrying our dirty-talking gangbanger and his chair down the long aisle toward the exit doors. They plopped him on the church stairway outside our main entrance. After that, there was a new respect for our no-nonsense usher team.

With nonstop crises at my door, little sleep, poor eating habits, and a full schedule, I started to wear down. The needs of the community began to overwhelm me. Our resources were scarce. Demands were increasing and my once bright vision was quickly fading. I believed God had led me here. But now I was wearing down. I was starting to feel like God had left me to fend for myself.

BURNED OUT IN FOUR MONTHS

Only a few months earlier I had walked slowly up the concrete stairs of the former Russian Orthodox church. It was my first day on the job and there was nobody else in the building. I strolled down the middle aisle to the small, makeshift office behind the stage and sat on an old wooden chair. My thoughts were interrupted by the scurrying of squirrel feet on the old tin ceiling. Apparently they liked my preaching and decided to make this their home church.

This small church on the southwest side of Chicago had about eighteen people and could afford to pay me only a minimal part-time salary. They had been looking for a pastor for about two years but were having a difficult time finding anyone willing to accept the salary and live in the neighborhood. In fact, at least one seminary candidate had driven by the building and rolled down his window but refused to get out of his car. Instead he locked his doors and sped away. Sunday morning we had a piano player to lead the singing, but Sunday night and Wednesdays the group sang a cappella out of hymnbooks. The small leadership committee was so desperate they asked me, a single twenty-one-year-old fresh out of college and with no pastoral experience, to be their pastor. I was naïve enough to say yes. Desperate and naïve—we made a great combination.

A businessman from the congregation felt sorry for me, so he allowed me to stay rent free in a building he owned that was used for offices and warehouse space. I lived in one room and shared the bathroom with the office workers. I had a mattress

on the floor and a flimsy table with two yellow vinyl-covered chairs. My books were stacked on the floor and I had mouse-traps strategically placed around my mattress to ward off the little critters that made their rounds at night.

The low pay and Spartan living conditions were not the greatest challenge. There were people in need everywhere I turned. I was single, young, full of unrestrained idealism, and wanting to help people. I soon found myself in a whirlwind of activity. I decided I would personally try to visit as many homes as possible in the community. It was the dead of winter, so not many people were hanging out on Chicago's frigid streets. I recruited any willing partner I could and we started visiting homes. On top of visiting people four nights a week, I was teaching three times a week, mentoring new people, teaching guitar lessons, hosting leadership meetings, counseling people in crisis, trying to raise money, organizing work crews, and preparing for my upcoming wedding. I even took on the task of emptying the bell tower of decades of pigeon droppings that filled twenty garbage bags. I don't seem to remember any class called "Bell Tower Cleaning 101" in seminary.

Several had left the mission church since I arrived. They opposed the changes I was making. Apparently our clapping and my guitar playing during the service were unacceptable to the old guard. So I managed to take a group of twenty down to fifteen in a few short weeks. We had no worship team or functioning Sunday school, and our offerings were pretty pathetic. Our building, constructed in 1910, was falling apart. Gang members hung out on the front steps of the church like

they owned the street corner. I was supposed to be getting married in a couple of months and I could barely afford to live on my \$8,000-a-year salary myself, let alone support a wife. I had no car of my own, no savings, and no insurance. I had been running hard from early in the morning to late at night with very few visible results to show. *Maybe*, I thought, *I'm not cut out to be a pastor.*

Since I had no insurance, my grandmother's doctor agreed to see me free of charge in the neighboring state of Indiana. I wasn't sure what was wrong but I knew I was out of energy and feeling very sick. After examining me the doctor sternly warned me that I needed bed rest and that my health was at risk if I did not take care of myself. That week on my grandmother's couch, I spent a full day moaning and complaining. I was semi-delirious, battling bouts of fever and drifting in and out of sleep.

"Why have You let this happen, God?" was my faint prayer. "How did I end up here, anyway?" I remembered what my last pastor told me when I talked to him about the possibility of working with a church in the inner city of Chicago. He looked at me somberly and said, "The city chews up and spits out pastors left and right. You'd better be sure God has called you there." At that moment, as I was lying on the couch, those words echoed in my mind. Uncertainty was settling in. I definitely felt chewed up and spit out. *Maybe I had* made a mistake. *Maybe I shouldn't be there.*

Eventually I summoned the strength to wrap myself in a blanket and made my way to the basement. I paced the length of that basement floor and continued grumbling to God that

I had done all that He had asked me to and that He had led me to a dead-end situation. I felt stuck and abandoned. The more I complained, the worse I felt. A dark cloud of bleakness settled over my prayers of complaint. In frustration I told God that I did not want to do this anymore. God was silent.

OUT OF THE BASEMENT

The next day I was too exhausted to keep complaining and too worn out to keep moaning. I just lay there wrapped in my blanket silent before God. Finally, in the silence of that dark basement, the still small whisper of God's voice began to pierce through the confusing noise of my spiritual dissonance. I slowly began to realize I had become too busy with my mission to make time to listen to God. The voice of people's needs and my drive to succeed had made me slip away from the most important call, my own walk with God.

Over the next couple of days I did some deep soul searching. I began to see some of the unhealthy pressures that were driving me. An older, well-established pastor I knew let people know that he doubted I would succeed at leading a church in the city. I started to think that I had to work hard to prove that I wouldn't fail. My identity was wrapped up in whether I failed or succeeded. To further complicate matters, I was dealing with unfinished business. I had been hurt by a group of people I expected to be supportive but who instead had been critical. In my mind they walked away when I needed them most. In addition I came face-to-face with an ugly arrogance in my soul. I had fallen into the trap of thinking that it was my

job to fix people, save people, and meet people's needs.

I caught myself praying, "Forgive me for attempting to do in my own strength what only You can do in the power of Your Spirit." I came to realize that God didn't need a miniature, pseudo-messiah frantically trying to do the work of the real Messiah. I admitted my self-reliance and lack of God dependence. I felt broken over the arrogance that had led me to such a dark place but humbled by the amazing grace of a God who was drawing me out. This was a turning point, a defining moment. When I finally walked up those basement stairs, I knew I had heard the whisper of God's Spirit.

I decided I could not do ministry the same way anymore. As I drove back to Chicago, I knew change was coming. I was driving back to the same pressure, people problems, and financial crises, but I felt different. I had a new awareness of my own weakness, a consciousness of my dependence on God.

In the months that followed, the little church began to experience unexpected breakthroughs. Suddenly people who had been resistant were now responding. It appeared as though an invisible lid was taken off our struggling congregation. Our worship services were brimming with a new sense of God's presence. What I had failed to do in my self-effort was happening as I stepped aside and made room for God. People from many backgrounds and diverse neighborhoods in Chicago began making their way to the old brick building on 44th and Paulina. This was the beginning of a new season.

SHAPED BY THE STRUGGLE

That brief but defining basement experience helped shape me in profound ways. My personal meltdown impressed upon me the importance of not going ahead of God, nor lagging behind Him but seeking to stay in step with what He is doing. I have often remembered the painful experience of being too busy for God and the frustration of trying to pursue my mission in my own strength. The early lessons I learned in the struggle to exit my cave have profoundly shaped my approach to life.

We all have our own sticking points that keep us from moving forward. I don't know your story, but I do know that a new season is within your grasp. I hope you are beginning to hear the spiritual whisper calling you toward the exit. That divine undertone, stirring a holy discontent that makes you long to live differently. I pray you find your heart even now being awakened to the possibilities of stepping bravely into your new season.