



***What Now?* is for anyone who wants to emerge from stagnation and envision what could be best for their next season of life. Learn to listen to the spiritual whisper directing you toward the next stage in your divine calling, and let this book help you step forward bravely.**

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YOU CAN'T STAY WHERE YOU ARE

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 didn't know how to move forward from here.

My mind raced back.

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 mousetraps strategically placed around my mattress to ward off the little rodents that made their rounds at night.

Several families quickly left the mission church after I arrived. 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 drained and my body ached. 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?" 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 dark 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. 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 gradually 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 dependence on God. I felt broken over the arrogance that had led me to such a dark

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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. A transition was taking place. A new season was starting to emerge.

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 frantic self-effort was beginning to happen 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 closely in step with His leading. I have often remembered the painful experience of being too busy for God and the frustration of trying to pursue a mission in my own strength. The early lessons I learned in the struggle to exit that basement and step back into my calling have profoundly shaped my approach to life.

Maybe you have been in your own “basement”—that place you don’t want to be in anymore but where God has put you temporarily to prepare you for your next season of life. The “basement” is usually a challenging place, a painful place of self-discovery, and a place where we come face-to-face with our own deficiencies and our need for God’s grace.

I think of Joseph, an immature seventeen-year-old who received a God-given dream, but he was not strong enough to carry the weight of that dream. So God allowed him to be thrown into an unexpected crisis through some toxic family drama. He is betrayed and sold into slavery by his very own brothers. A powerful man by the name of Potiphar buys Joseph and puts him to work at his estate. In this “basement” crisis, Joseph is forced to learn hard work, administration skills, delegation, and eventually management abilities. Just about the time that his life seems to be improving, he is falsely accused and thrown into the second phase of crisis called “prison.” So he goes from crisis to crisis without taking a break. In prison he learns compassion for other inmates and discovers that he has a God-given ability to interpret dreams. At a “soul level,” Joseph has been stripped of his young arrogance

and, through pain and perseverance, is being shaped into a leader God can use.

Now he is about thirty years old and finally prepared to carry the weight of his dream and fulfill his calling. In the first part of his crisis, he learned management and leadership abilities. In the second half of his crisis, he discovered gifting he never knew he had. His “basement” experience equipped him with leadership abilities and gift discovery that prepared him for his ultimate calling. Joseph saved his family and rescued a nation from a devastating famine. When Joseph finally reveals his true identity to the brothers who had betrayed him and sold him into slavery, he makes a profound statement: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen. 50:20).

As I write, our country is going through one of the worst pandemics since the Spanish flu of 1918. Millions of people have been forced to quarantine, stay home from work, and practice social distancing. Schools have shut down, businesses have had to hang “closed” signs on their doors, churches have stopped gatherings, weddings have been postponed, graduations cancelled, and life as

we know it has been put on pause. As we move toward “reopening,” many are asking, “What will the future look like for me?” Maybe your future will depend on what you learn in the crisis while life is on pause. What dreams are being shaped? What skills are being developed? What character is being strengthened? What is God doing in your life now to prepare you for what may be the most influential season of your life?

As you look back over your own story and try to explain how you ended up where you are, you may discover the same thing I did. There are many events that have affected your journey. Typically it was not one event that got you where you are; it was a series of events—and your response to those events—that led you to your current predicament.

I have seen many vibrant, gifted people unexpectedly end up stalled on the side of the road. They are scratching their heads and wondering what in the world happened to them. Often they linger so long in that spiritual traffic jam that their soul drains, their dreams evaporate, and they dismiss their vision as a season of naïve, youthful idealism.

Millions of Americans are undergoing a period of great testing and deep disruption. There are many questions and uncertainties about the future. Some will flounder and cling to the past in a desperate effort to avoid a new reality. Many will focus on just getting back to “normal.” Others will be shaped by the crisis and equipped like never before to embrace a new future.

THE DEFINING MOMENT

Most of us reach a point when we have to decide whether we will continue to cling to the security of an old season or step into the uncertainty of a new one. This is a defining moment. It involves a step of obedience, an act of faith, and trusting our heavenly Father. You will know clearly if you have taken this step or not. I have met many people who know what they should do but live their life in perpetual postponement. They deceive themselves into thinking that they are on the way but actually are stuck waiting for the right timing, resources, or change in circumstances. They live with the illusion of progress but the reality of perpetual postponement.

In the next few chapters, we will take a look at the

five-step process to moving forward. Being willing to work through the progression of transition is what separates those who remain trapped and those who move to their next season.

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 next phase in God's plan for you. 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 next season.

The first step is to quiet your soul and start to listen to the still small voice.

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