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Foreword

THERE ARE THREE THINGS you need to know about my son Matthew.

The first thing is that every day, every opportunity, every new person he meets gets him charged up. I've never seen anyone love life more; he can't wait to get up in the morning. Because of that, people like to be around him. He's like the Pied Piper—just full of fun, everywhere he goes—and he's always building people up through his positive attitude.

The second thing is that he can keep more balls in the air at one time, and do it well, than anybody I've ever met. Just take a look at the Dream Center, an inner-city ministry offering an amazing number and variety of programs. Against all odds, a twenty-year-old boy got things started because he allowed God to work through him. Today, because he perseveres with that same spirit, Matthew keeps all the programs going—and going strong.

The third is that he has a generous spirit. Matthew is the most giving person I know. Not only is he free with his time and encouragement, on a practical level he can't carry much cash on him because by the time he gets to wherever he's going, he's given it all away to people in need!

THE CAUSE WITHIN YOU

Now let me ask you . . . does this sound like the kind of life you want to be living? Does the idea of all this passion and purpose excite you? Do you want people to talk about you this way? It is more than possible; it is God's dream for you.

The reason Matthew lives this way is because he is driven by the special cause God has planted within him: when he sees somebody with a need, he feels called to fill it. That's how he's built the Dream Center ministry, which you'll read about in this book. At the Dream Center, we follow Jesus' example of finding a need and meeting it; finding a hurt and healing it. Jesus built his own church up on healing and helping and reaching out to people. So when Matthew sees a hurt, he doesn't get discouraged; he views it as a great opportunity to do something for God.

If I can tell you one thing for sure, it is this: everybody must have a cause if they're going to be happy in life. You need something that makes you want to wake up in the morning, excited, ready to face the day. Matthew is that way because he's discovered his cause, and that's what makes his life. If you're living for something that's *not* your cause, you may reach your dream, but it's going to feel disappointing, like a letdown. Your fun is in climbing, in pursuing your cause. And the reason the cause makes your life is that you never run out of it. You will *always* have something to give. So if happiness to you is palms up—living only for what you receive—you'll only be happy at your birthday and Christmas. But if you have a cause, happiness is your palms down—what you can give to other people—because the need will always be there.

Matthew discovered his calling at a young age. Let me tell you, though, if you are feeling the drive to discover your cause, what I want to say to you is that *it's never too late*. I see it all the time in my church—you're going along with life and then you get a little tap on the shoulder, a prompting, telling you that maybe God is directing you another way. Maybe you're successful in your line of work,

maybe you have a good income, and you're pretty well set for life, but you find it doesn't scratch the itch in your heart. I guarantee that you may have more to bring to your cause than even someone who knows theirs at a young age. I see older people who begin to act on their cause later in life, and in many cases they have far more qualifications than someone like me who went directly into ministry. They've got passion, drive, business ability, and—most importantly—the freshness that comes with making a new beginning.

Let me tell you a story about Matthew and me that shows how perfectly God's plan works, how he ordains us to be exactly where he wants us, right in his will, living out our causes.

When the leaders of my denomination first approached me about pioneering a ministry in Los Angeles, they said there was nothing there yet but a dream. They were hoping I could shepherd Bethel Temple, a small, historic church in the denomination, back to health. When they asked me to pray about the opportunity, I couldn't exactly say no! And secretly, my heart leaped within me. I hadn't told them this, but when I was twenty years old and on my way to Bethel Temple to hold a revival, I drove past the Angelus Temple. I had a strong feeling—I believe it was a prompting of the Holy Spirit—that one day I would pastor a church in this area. I had hidden that feeling in my heart all those years.

When I decided to accept the opportunity, I knew I needed somebody to work with. I began talking to potential candidates—they'd get very excited on the phone, but when they'd go to LA and see the run-down area where they'd be ministering, suddenly they'd change their minds.

Now, one of my more well-known sermons at the time was called "The Miracle in the House." It's based on the idea that everything you need to build a great church is in your house. And one day, a man in my church who knew I'd been searching for a ministry partner said, "Pastor, you're foolish! You're searching and searching for the right person to help you when the miracle is right in your house!"

“Matthew is just a twenty-year-old boy,” I retorted.

“Yeah, but I’ve heard you preach, ‘Don’t despise a person’s youth.’”

I just hate it when they use my own preaching against me.

After several others came to me with the same counsel, and after much thought, I asked Matthew to join me in LA as co-pastor. He accepted, and Bethel Temple later merged with Angelus Temple. But what Matthew didn’t tell me—what I didn’t learn until years later—was this:

“When I was sixteen,” he ultimately told me, “I was standing outside, looking up at the stars one Sunday night after church. As I was praying, the Lord impressed upon my heart that by the age of twenty I’d be pastoring a church in LA.”

I looked at him, shocked. I had no idea he had wanted to go to LA, and at that age he didn’t know about my calling to the Angelus Temple. “I didn’t want to tell you that at first, Dad, in case it might influence your decision to ask me to go. I knew that God would have to be the one to tell you, not me.”

And He did. And you’re about to learn what happened as a result.

More important, you’re going to learn how to discover the cause God has for you, just as God steered Matthew to the people in inner-city Los Angeles who needed hope and healing. This is how we build a life: find people with needs and try to fill them, and you’ll see how happy it makes you. Live vicariously through them. It’s the highest form of living, because you give up a little of something you want so that other people can have a lot of it. That’s really what Matthew has done. He’s given up a lot of his life so that a lot of people can turn their lives around.

Read this book and discover what *your* cause is. Trust me: finding it will make your life.

Pastor Tommy Barnett
First Assembly of God in Phoenix

A NIGHT ON THE STREETS

SOMETHING STIRRED ME AWAKE. I struggled to open my eyes. My surroundings slowly came into focus. It was dark, with rays of light off to the side that barely penetrated my peripheral vision. I heard indistinct noises nearby, a kind of low mumbling coming from a few feet away. And I felt a presence. As things came into focus, I found that somebody was staring into my eyes. I stared back and realized it wasn't a *somebody*—it was a *something*.

I squinted to crystallize the image and realized it was a cat. No, wait, it was a . . . rat. A rat the size of a cat! Supersized. Its eyes were maybe three inches from mine, its whiskers even closer. Other than the twitching of its nostrils as it catalogued my scent, it was perfectly still, studying me with obvious hostility.

Now I was awake, aware of where I was and what was happening. I remembered having carefully placed my large sheet of cardboard on the pavement in this alleyway, maybe twenty minutes ago, hoping for

an hour of peaceful slumber on the streets of Los Angeles. What was it—four, maybe five o'clock in the morning? An unrhythmic series of moans filled the air from other homeless people lying farther up the alley, doing their best to get some shut-eye. I'd dozed off for a few minutes before this bucktoothed rodent invaded my twelve square feet of prime real estate.

I struggled to my feet, picked up my cardboard bed, and slowly shuffled out of the alley onto the main street. My watch said it was 2:13 a.m. Time was obviously on a holiday tonight. The light from the streetlamps was the only illumination in this part of the city.

I passed by a boarded-up shop and caught the strong, ever-present whiff of urine. That seemed to be the odor of the homeless nation: there were no bathrooms available to us in the dead of night—or during a large share of the day, for that matter. When you had to go, you found a wall in a vacant section of an alley and did your business. The Porta Potties strategically distributed around this section of the city, meant for the homeless, were of no use to us since they'd been hijacked by the prostitutes and drug dealers, who complete their transactions inside those mobile offices. They were the only businesses open 24-7 down here, peddling flesh and pharms. No homeless person in his right mind would enter those disease-riddled fiberglass boxes unless they were completing a deal.

Fellow vagabonds shuffled past me, traveling in the opposite direction. A woman wearing a tattered army jacket and a wraparound skirt that was frayed at her calloused, bare feet hobbled by. Her hair was a mess of tangles, her eyes sunken, wrinkles creasing her forehead as she shuffled along. A frail man who looked to be in his mid-fifties but was probably thirtyish was a few paces behind her, toting a ragged backpack that I suspected contained all of his worldly possessions. Another haggard-looking fellow was ten feet farther down the sidewalk, slumped over one of the parking meters, staring vacantly across the street. He had nowhere to go, no time by which he had

to be there. He was simply taking a break from his nightly march to wherever.

These fellow denizens of the streets were dead on their feet, but experience had taught them to keep moving, to stay alert. Darkness was the scourge of life; inactivity was an invitation to danger. While I trooped up and down the streets of skid row, I occasionally looked these passersby straight in the face, searching for signs of hope, but had learned to lower my standards and seek a simple expression of life. Very few returned my gaze. These people were on autopilot, traipsing lifelessly forward, silently repeating the mantra the homeless chant to themselves each night: *Gotta make it 'til sunrise. Gotta make it 'til sunrise. . . .*



As a bloodcurdling scream radiated from around the corner ahead, I ducked into the hollowed-out doorway of a storefront and leaned against the mesh security door for support. I felt an indescribable mixture of emotions: yes, there was fear, but it was tempered by joy, intrigue, excitement, and compassion. You see, I was on skid row *by choice*. This was a one-night-only command performance among the people whom I have spent my entire adult life serving.

I am the pastor of a “megachurch,” a proud bastion of Christianity in the heart of downtown Los Angeles. Tonight was the fifteenth anniversary of the beginning of our ministry, known as the Dream Center, in which we help to restore the shattered dreams and empty lives of broken people. To the horror of my church colleagues, and against the advice of many, I decided this was where I wanted to spend that anniversary: living among the very people I have come to love during these past fifteen years.

I was on skid row by choice. This was a one-night-only command performance among the people whom I have spent my entire adult life serving.

If I had stayed with the original game plan, I would have been home in my comfortable bed, lying next to my beautiful, loving wife, Caroline, resting peacefully in our single-family house while our two children slept securely down the hall. I would have been dreaming about the incredible celebration that would have taken place earlier in the evening at the special dinner planned for the hundred or so key people who made the Dream Center tick. We would have watched videos of past ministry victories; joyfully sung praises to God; eaten a delicious, well-prepared meal; and listened to people's recollections of how God had done miracle after miracle in our midst and inspired us to keep battling the odds for fifteen years. It would have been a night to remember.

Now, barely five hours into my "alternative celebration," I knew this was certainly a night I would never forget.

A few weeks before, as the planned celebration got closer and the preparations intensified, I felt uneasy in my gut. That's often how God grabs my attention. In response, I spent time praying for Him to clarify what He wanted. Soon it became clear to me that a party to celebrate ourselves was not what God had in mind. I could sense that He was looking for me to do something radical, not something comfortable and self-serving. Unsure what that might be, I enlisted several people from my team to join me in prayer and to wait for further divine direction.

Finally, the solution came into focus: I should spend the anniversary night on the streets of skid row in Los Angeles. I've worked hand in hand with poor and suffering people for fifteen years. I've spent countless hours on the city streets offering to help them and even to transport them from skid row to our campus, where we partnered with them in breaking the bondage of poverty and bad choices. But in those fifteen years I had never spent a night sleeping in their midst, on the concrete. Truthfully, it had never even occurred to me to do so. Wasn't I doing enough already?

Maybe not. The clear impression I received was that God was intent upon pushing me beyond my comfort zone, orchestrating something that would forever change me. Again.

The sheer magnitude of the idea marked it as God's; the absurdity of the option underscored its necessity.

It became obvious that throwing ourselves a party was appropriate by the world's standards, but not by God's. An anniversary gala would be a sign of naive hubris. From the day this ministry began, it was built upon going against the grain, doing the unexpected. A party? The greatest celebration would be to demonstrate solidarity with those I serve, to dig more deeply into their world so I could serve them more profoundly.



So after we had our regular Thursday night service at the church, I put on the clothes I'd grabbed specially for this night—a grimy T-shirt; a generic gray hoodie; a pair of baggy, ill-fitting cargo pants; and sneakers.

My prep team at the church included a tall, slender African American man named Lawrence,* who was one of our security guards. Lawrence originally came to the Dream Center from the same streets to which we were headed. He'd been desperately in need of help, had successfully completed one of our recovery programs, and now had his life on an even keel. When he heard what we were up to, he rushed to my side and begged me not to go. Seeing my resolve, he changed his tactic and insisted on preparing me for the odyssey that lay ahead.

“You don't know what you doing, Pastor,” he said respectfully. “Let me get you ready so you can survive the night. There's things you don't know about the streets, and those streets is mean, Pastor. I can teach

* In several places in this book the names of individuals have been changed to protect their privacy. The stories are true; only their names have been changed.

you a few things that will help.” In retrospect, I believe Lawrence’s survival tips may have saved my life.

After we smeared some grease on my face and ruffled my hair, I boarded a church van and was driven to the central business district of Los Angeles. Amidst the towering buildings in center city I disembarked and said a quick prayer with the team members in the van. Then I pulled my large piece of cardboard from the back and trudged the six blocks from the corporate haven to the edge of skid row. I had no money in my pockets; I really wanted to know what it felt like to be homeless. My only protection, at Lawrence’s insistence, was a well-worn Bible.

As I strode toward my destination, I again pondered what I was about to do. Was this insane? I wondered. I’m the husband of a wife who loves me, the father of two young children who depend on me, the pastor of a thriving church that gets its direction from me. I’m not indispensable, but was this urban adventure demonstrating the wisdom of a godly man? Did this decision display the discernment of a true leader? Was I engaging in an act of courage, or was it mere foolish-

As a “successful” pastor, was I settling for what was now a routine process that insulated me from the suffering and tragedies that had sparked my ministry so many years ago?

ness? Was I demeaning the homeless by dressing up and pretending to be one of them? What was the likelihood of even surviving the night?

My self-doubts were interrupted by the sight of a genuine homeless guy—not a fake like me—moving toward skid row some twenty feet ahead of me on the otherwise deserted sidewalk. I called out to him and explained who I really was and asked him if he thought I would survive the night. His reply came without emotion or hesitation.

“Nope,” he said evenly, looking me in the eye. “You’re too clean. They’ll sniff you out in a heartbeat. Won’t work. Go home.” He nodded a silent good-bye and resumed his slow hobble toward the edge of helplessness.

For a moment that seemed like all the convincing I needed. Maybe God had sent him to meet me there, an angel of mercy, to deliver one final warning, a word of sanity to break the spell of lunacy that was propelling me toward disaster. Maybe it was time to call off this whole charade. Who was I trying to fool?

But as I stood there trying to get a firm fix on my emotions, my confidence returned. I wasn't here to perform a circus trick or to get the public's attention—"Hey everyone! Come see the pastor who lived for a night on skid row! Hear tales of bravery and stories of the dark side!" No, I was on the streets because I have come to truly love the unlovable. I have discovered how God can love the people that nobody else wants. And frankly, after fifteen years, I was worried that I'd lost my edge.

As a "successful" pastor, was I settling for what was now a routine process that insulated me from the suffering and tragedies that had sparked my ministry so many years ago? Had I become too comfortable in what we did to serve poor and hurting people? Was I now simply a motivational speaker, a fund-raiser, an organizational figurehead, a ministry expert doing good works but living a safe, sanitized existence?

I turned to watch the homeless man shuffle away from me. In that moment it was clear that God wanted me to do something radical; He wanted me to do *this*. I couldn't imagine anything more radical than humbling myself in this fashion, embracing the same risks that Jesus Christ had adopted when He lived and ministered among the untouchables of His day.

Hanging out on skid row for a day or two, with an open mind and heart, was not meant to be a quaint or clever adventure that would "preach well." It was a necessary recalibration to get me back on track—in sync with the cause God had instilled in me fifteen years before.