

When God's Primary Pursuit Becomes Your Life's Driving Passion

SOUL OBSESSION

**NICKY
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with Frank Martin

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This book is dedicated to several people who have touched my soul.



BOBBY AND ROSE CRUZ

Bobby is the founding pastor of House of Prayer Church in Miami, Florida. He came from the secular world of entertainment and is known as the father of salsa music. Bobby along with Richie Ray invented salsa music. There was a time when they were as popular as The Beatles, and their popularity remains very strong to this day. They are loved not only in Puerto Rico, but all the Latin American countries as well as Europe and Japan. I've been to their concerts with stadiums filled to capacity and witnessed as they stopped the concert to share about Jesus and His love. During these times they don't pull any punches and they always offer the opportunity to accept Christ. Bobby is so sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and I consider it an honor to call him my friend and spiritual son.

SONNY AND JULIE ARGUINZONI

As the founder of Victory Outreach International, Sonny has brought dignity to the unwanted for over thirty-five years. Victory Outreach has founded more than five hundred churches worldwide and done more

to save kids from drugs and alcohol than any ministry I'm aware of. Jesus took Sonny, a former addict, and made him a powerful man of God. Sonny will always hold a special place in my heart. To me, he is like Mother Teresa—he opens the fields of hope to the poor and downcast. Sonny is my spiritual son, and I love him like a brother.

MARILU AND CARLOS DONES REYES

Together they cofounded the Bethel Baptist Church in Puerto Rico more than thirty years ago—a church they faithfully pastor to this day. Like me, they believe in doing whatever it takes to spread the gospel and lead people to Jesus. They are completely sold out to God and to their community. Marilu and Carlos are people of prayer, principle, and character—never compromising, never giving up. I am so proud to have them as my friends!

VICTOR AND CARMEN TORRES

Victor is my spiritual son; he was saved while at Teen Challenge in New York City when I was the director. Victor and his wife, Carmen, are the founding pastors of New Life Outreach International, a growing church in Richmond, Virginia. I am proud of them; they've come a long way. Through the good, the bad, and the in-between, they have persevered and remained consis-

tent in their walk with the Lord. They are true examples that integrity in ministry pays off, which is evidenced in their service to God.

REGGIE WHITE

Reggie went home to be with the Lord in December, 2004. What an incredible man of God he was! Reggie had such a gift for winning people to Jesus. He was always witnessing to everyone and was especially committed to reaching other African Americans. Reggie's life was a testimony to the world and most effectively to those who followed sports. I knew Reggie as a very generous man, as a man who walked with Christ and never compromised. To Sara and their children, Jeremy and Jecolia, I loved Reggie, he was my friend and I will miss him.

FRANK BAEZ

Frank was my spiritual son who recently went home to be with the Lord. The amazing thing about Frank was the humbleness of his life. Of the thirteen that I sent to school, Frank went a different direction. His only support came from me and Jesus. Frank was true to his salvation, his calling, and to his beautiful wife, Lolita. Frank will be missed not only by me, but by many others, including his family and home congregation in Brighton, Colorado.

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REDEEMED BY LOVE

I was twenty-two years old when I received word that my mother was dying, and I wasn't prepared for the mixed feelings this news would elicit within me.

I was living in New York at the time, still a relatively new baby in the faith, and serving as the head of Teen Challenge Ministries. My mother was in Las Piedras, Puerto Rico, on her deathbed in the tiny stucco home where I had grown up. Most of my seventeen brothers and one sister were already at her side by the time the news reached me.

I wished I could have said that I loved my mother at the time, but I couldn't. If anything, my feelings toward her ranged from hate to indifference. I'd spent much of my childhood hiding from her and the balance of it getting away from her. To me she symbolized everything that I despised about my past.

I wanted so much to forget the many times she had beaten me and cursed at me. I felt detested by her, even as a young boy. I remember standing before her once as she called me a "child of the devil" in front of her

friends. She made me feel like nothing, a waste of space on the earth, a mistake, an ugly child who should never have been born.

For so many years I longed to get close to my mother, to hold her, to feel her kiss on my cheek. But Satan had such a grip on her heart that she didn't know how to love, and I didn't know how to love her back. Evil had taken hold in her spirit, and it wouldn't let her go. Wouldn't allow her to be the mother that I so desperately wanted and needed.

And now she was dying. *Was I supposed to be sad? to cry? to pretend that I loved her and run to her side like any good son would do?* I honestly didn't know. But deep in my heart I did know what Jesus would do. He would go see his dying mother. So I booked a flight to Puerto Rico.

I had forgotten how beautiful Puerto Rico could be. Growing up in such darkness and horror, I had never learned to appreciate the picturesque surroundings of our little island in the Atlantic. Las Piedras is perfectly nestled in a valley of lush green, framed by untold beauty. You feel as if you could reach out with one arm and embrace the magnificent El Yunque Mountains, and with the other allow your fingers to swim along the aqua blue waters of the ocean. We used to call this place "The Rainfall." It's one of the most stunning places on earth.

Seeing my parents' house for the first time in seven years was a bit of a shock for me. The place looked so small and insignificant. Like any other house on the block. But in my heart I knew that wasn't true. This house was evil to the core, filled with horrible memories and unspeakable pain. Every crevice harbored demons of abuse and neglect—demons that still lingered, roaming the halls at night, haunting like a bad nightmare. I could feel them in my bones.

Behind the home, about a hundred yards into the woods, still stood the large round building—the place that so frightened me as a child and

now sent chills to the center of my being. As a boy I knew it only as the “Spirit House,” the place where my mother and father went regularly to summon the healing spirits. The town was convinced that they knew what went on here, and rumors ran thick throughout Puerto Rico, but few had seen it up close and personal. They suspected evil and talked of the hideous things going on inside the infamous Spirit House; I had seen it firsthand.

As I stood staring at the large round building framed by trees, the memories began to rise to the surface. Memories of strange and unexplainable things that happened here on a regular basis—things that I still resist speaking of, all these years later.

My father was a spiritist—some say the most powerful in all of Puerto Rico—and my mother was a medium. So many times I watched helplessly from outside the window as their bizarre *séances* raged out of control. People inside would wail and moan and scream, summoning the spirits of the dead to awaken in their presence. Sometimes these spirits would take over my mother’s body, turning her face white and her eyes violently yellow. Once I saw an evil spirit come upon her with such force that it catapulted her through the air. Though she was a small woman, it took four or five men to contain her.

Another time I saw my father become possessed by a spirit he couldn’t control. He grabbed my youngest brother, put a rope around his neck, and tried to hang him from the limb of a tree. It took the combined strength of the whole family to hold him down as my brother slipped free. Later my father had no memory of the ordeal. In his right mind he would never have done such a thing to his children.

Even at a young age I understood the dangers of dabbling in the occult. Yet I found myself living in a home that did far more than dabble. We were known throughout the island as the home of *El Taumaturgo* (the Wonder

Worker, the Great One). The place you go to find the warlock and the witch of Las Piedras.

BOUND BY PAIN

I couldn't remember how many times I had sworn never to come back—never again to darken the evil doors of my parents' home. Yet here I was. And my mother was dying. As I slipped through the small corridors of our house, I could feel the satanic forces surrounding the house, the forces that had kept my family bound in darkness for so many years.

My mother didn't recognize me the first time I walked into her bedroom. I can still see her lying there, babbling incoherently, with sweat pouring down the sides of her face. I tried to talk to her, but she just stared at me, her eyes cold and empty. Lifeless eyes. Loveless eyes.

"Mama, it's me, Nicky," I said to her several times. She didn't respond, just stared right through me as if I wasn't there.

As if she were possessed by some ancient, evil spirit.

The sight of my mother's dark and wicked gaze was more than I could handle, so I turned and fled. I told my father I would be back, but I wasn't sure I meant it. *Why am I even here?* I thought. *She doesn't love me; she doesn't even know me. Her days of evil have caught up with her, and now she's facing God's judgment. Who am I to interfere?*

I took off walking down the street, down the long road leading away from my parents' house, away from the evil that hovered and haunted all around. The whole time I was there I could feel Satan taunting me, touching me, grabbing at my clothes. My parents' home was a rathole of evil, and I could feel it with every fiber of my being. I had to get away, to escape the forces of oppression attacking me.

I considered catching an early flight back to New York, back to Gloria and my new life in God's service. People there needed me—people at Teen Challenge, the ministry that God had called me to. There they understood me. They knew that I was no longer a slave to my past, no longer bound to the hate and abuse of my childhood. No longer the “child of the devil” that my mother had tried to make me.

She deserves this fate. She will die as she lived—surrounded by sin and possessed by evil. I can't help her now. No one can. She worshiped Satan on earth, now she will spend an eternity licking his boots in hell!

As I walked along the lush green valley, listening to the birds singing and the animals scurrying through the woods, the farther I got from the house the more peaceful things became. The scent of Satan grew dimmer with each step. I had every intention of leaving, of going back to New York and forgetting my mother forever, of going on with my life and putting my past behind me. Yet somewhere, deep in my spirit, I knew I couldn't. God wouldn't let me go. I knew I had to go back.

Suddenly I heard the sound of singing in the distance. Beautiful voices, echoing through the wind, like songs of praise. I remembered a church not far from my parents' home. It was Monday evening, and I didn't expect anyone to be in church, yet the sounds grew stronger as I drew nearer. *I need to be around other believers*, I thought. *People like me. Maybe they can pray with me—pray for me. Give me some spiritual support before I have to face those evil eyes again!*

A CRY FOR HELP

I walked to the church and sat in the back. They were having testimonies, so I sat and listened until there was an appropriate opportunity for me to

rise and make a statement about my family. The pastor didn't know me, so as I stood, I introduced myself. I said, "My name is Nicky Cruz, son of Don Galo and Aleja Velazques Cruz. I want to ask you to come to my house to pray for my mother."

"Welcome, Nicky," he said, and we embraced.

A group gathered around us as I told him of my dying mother. I explained my need for prayers and support, and as I was speaking, I repeated, "Pastor, would you be willing to come with me and pray for my mother?"

Before he had a chance to answer, I turned to those standing nearby and asked, "Would any of you come and pray for my mother?"

No one said a word. The silence was deafening, and several stepped back. Suddenly one woman moved forward—a woman with fire in her eyes and hate in her voice. "We cannot go to that house," she said. "That house is evil. That man and woman are demon-possessed. All their children are evil. Even their dog is possessed by the devil. We will not go near that place."

My heart sank. I glanced around the room, and no one would look at me. All eyes fell to the floor, sheepishly. It wasn't apathy I sensed but fear. Everyone knew what went on at the Spirit House.

I caught the pastor's eyes and locked onto them. Then in one last effort, I said to him, "Pastor, I'm going to ask you again. Are you willing to come to my house and pray for my mother?"

The pastor's gaze floated around the room as he considered his response. One by one he looked at those standing nearby. Everyone waited for his response. He turned to me and said, "Nicky, you know I will be there."

Again he surveyed his small flock, including the woman who had spoken so harshly, then added, "We'll all be there."

AN UNEXPECTED MIRACLE

We had scheduled to meet at my mother's house around seven the next evening, and by seven thirty no one had shown up. I waited on the front porch, watching the long road winding to my parents' home, yet no one came. *They're not coming*, I thought. *The pastor couldn't convince anyone to venture near the evil Spirit House.*

At eight o'clock I rose to my feet, discouraged, deflated. Feeling abandoned and alone. *I should have known they would be too frightened to come.*

I walked toward my parents' front door but, before opening it, turned to look one last time down the road. In the distance I caught sight of some people walking toward the house. Not just a few, but dozens of people. The line kept growing and growing. Within minutes people were flocking toward the house, playing guitars and tambourines. The sweet fragrance of their music filled the air around us.

Soon our yard was packed with fellow villagers, not thirty or fifty, as I had hoped, but several hundred! Never had our small home seen so many visitors. They came from all directions, introducing themselves to me as they arrived. There were Methodists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Catholics, all faiths and denominations, from all over our little town of Las Piedras, coming to pray for my mother. And they didn't come for a quick visit; they came to rumble with the devil!

I could hardly contain the tears as people kept arriving, flooding into my mother's home by the dozens. When the house could hold no more, they surrounded the yard and locked hands. A circle of believers swallowed our tiny home. All around, believers were laying hands on the house, anointing it with oils of blessing, praying for protection and deliverance

from evil. My father didn't know what to do. I could see in his eyes how uncomfortable he was, and the rest of my family banded together in a tight circle, quiet, confused. Intimidated.

You could feel the Spirit of God hovering over us, engulfing the halls of the house, encircling my family. The power of his presence was palpable.

I made my way to the living room, where my mother was lying on the sofa, and stood about six feet away from her. I can still see her eyes as she looked at me, frightened and confused. She knew who I was; I could tell by her anxious gaze.

The windows were open and a sudden burst of cool east wind blew through the house, through the halls, filling the rooms with freshness. It was as if God's Spirit had burst through the window, cleansing the house of evil, joining us in our rumble against the king of darkness. Everyone felt it. Everyone knew that God's Spirit had come to rest among us, to show his muscle, to shine grace and mercy upon this house of evil, to open the gates of hell and set the captive free.

I noticed the pastor standing across the room from me, and he asked me to say something. I tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Tears flooded the sides of my face as I stood weeping, my eyes closed, my heart filled with mixed emotions.

What do I say? I wanted to pray, but the words wouldn't come. My mind was in a fog. Tears grew even thicker on my cheeks as I stood silently before my mother and a room filled with strangers. I wanted so desperately for God to work a miracle in my mother's heart. I knew that he could. He had done such a miracle in my heart and for many others that I knew.

At that instant, Jesus spoke to my heart as clearly as he's ever spoken. *Nicky*, he said, *this is your mother. I know that she hasn't been the mother you*

needed. I know the pain you feel. But today is the day of forgiveness. I forgave you, Nicky, but now you need to forgive your mother. Let it go.

As I stood there sobbing, drenched in my own tears, I suddenly felt a tug at the bottom of my pants leg. It shocked me, and I quickly opened my eyes. To this day I don't know how my mother made her way off the sofa and to my feet, but as I looked down I saw her feeble frame on the floor beneath me. She could barely raise her arms, yet she found the strength to reach up for me. Her eyes begged me to touch her, to talk to her.

I dropped to my knees and found myself face to face with my mother. She was still reaching out toward me, her eyes filled with tears. "Nicky," she said, "I know how much I've hurt you. I've destroyed you. I have no right to ask you this, but if you can find it in your heart, please forgive me. I'm so sorry for all I've done."

I tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Never had my mother looked at me this way. Never had I seen anything but hate exploding from her eyes, and now she looked at me with love. I couldn't hold back my tears. I looked deep into her eyes, and she spoke again. "Nicky, please let me kiss you."

I leaned my face in closer, and my mother kissed me on the cheek. Her lips were warm and tender—lips that had never before touched my face. Not once in my childhood could I remember her kissing me. I blubbered like a bruised child.

At that very instant I could feel God reach into my heart and take away the pain, the hate, the indifference. For the first time in my life, I loved my mother. The fear was gone. The chasm between us was bridged forever. I felt nothing but love and forgiveness in my heart.

"Mama," I said, "you know I forgive you. I love you."

Our eyes met and she melted in my arms, sobbing even harder. For an eternity we wept in each other's arms. Then I said to her, "Give your heart to Jesus, Mama. He's the one who wants to forgive you. Accept Jesus's love, Mama. You need Jesus!"

There on the floor, crying in my arms, my mother accepted Jesus into her heart. I prayed with her as she asked God to forgive her for a lifetime of hate and sin. With my own eyes I saw the Spirit of God come upon her. Even as I was praying, I could feel her bones strengthen. Her eyes became clear as never before. She rose to her feet before me, still feeble, but able to stand, able to think and speak clearly for the first time in months.

In front of the crowd and my family, not only did God forgive my mother, but he healed her. Though the doctors said she would probably not last through the night, she grew stronger before our eyes. All around people stood clapping, praying, rejoicing at the miracle we had all witnessed. The witch of Las Piedras was now a child of God!

A BROKEN CURSE

My mother lived another twenty-five years and seven months, and she remained faithful to God until her dying day. In that time she was able to bring my father to Jesus. He renounced witchcraft and turned his heart toward God. Hundreds of people throughout the island were impacted by my mother's faith. She developed a passion for Jesus, and her faith became as real and strong as anyone's I have ever known.

Through those years, she and I grew closer than I ever imagined possible. I never again felt anything but love for my mother, and she felt the same for me. Finally I was able to get to know who my mother really was, not the cold mother that I remembered from my past, but who she was in her heart.

God began to reveal to me the pain and confusion that she had lived with all those years. How intimidated she had felt by my father, a strong and stern man, caught up in Satan's evil grip. At a young age he seduced her into a life of witchcraft and sorcery and all that was connected to it, and she spent many years bound alongside him. I've always thought it ironic that she would later free my father from the life that he had drawn her into and that she would introduce him to Jesus.

My mother found herself completely overwhelmed by the task of raising so many children and trying to keep her home together. She wanted so much to be a good mother, to be a loving, caring wife, but she didn't know how. She had married so young and beautiful into a world that she knew nothing about, a world of occultism and witchery and black magic. A world that soon came to consume her.

But God came in and took all that away. He gave us back the years we lost to Satan. He redeemed the days of evil and restored our family forever. Today my only sister and thirteen of my brothers are serving Jesus. Three of them are ministers of the gospel. My family has been securely planted into the Tree of Life forever. No more curse of darkness haunts us. Satan has no more hold on the Cruz family. We once served him, but now we despise him. We are eternally free! And each of us pursues Jesus with a relentless passion!

What I have experienced in my family is a miracle far beyond what I expected when I gave my heart to Jesus. I never imagined he would reach into my past and erase it, breaking the curse that had plagued us for as long as anyone could remember. He did for us what only God can do—what he has done for so many through the years. He took away the pain and replaced it with love. He removed the anger and exchanged it for forgiveness.

Hearts that once cursed him now burn with a holy passion for his love.

Children who grew up in pain and abuse now harbor only mercy and compassion for others. Slaves who once bowed down to Satan now live under a glorious new covenant with God.

A HEART OF PURPOSE

That's how God works when he redeems his people. He does so much more than save us; he *restores* us. Whatever Satan has stolen, God gives back. Whatever time we've lost to sin, he reclaims through love. The wounds inflicted upon us by the world are healed by his wonderful grace.

This is the Jesus we worship—the Savior who died so that we can live!

This is the message we bring to a world still bound by sin.

This is the only testimony worth telling—the only thing that really matters!

How can we not shout it from the rooftops? How can we ever slip into moments of apathy after all that God has done for us? How can we not live with uninhibited passion and zeal, knowing what we know? understanding what we understand about Satan and his lies? after experiencing the unconditional forgiveness that Jesus brings?

How can any man keep silent?

Since the day Jesus came into my heart, my obsession in life has been to save lost souls! At that moment, Jesus burned into my heart a soul obsession—a blazing passion for those in need of a Savior. It is a fire that has never waned, never tired, never relented. It is the blood that runs through my veins—what drives me forward, day after day, month after month, year after glorious year. My heart bursts with the message of God's love and faithfulness, and all I want to do is to share that truth with others!

Someone once asked me, "What is the greatest miracle you've ever

seen?” I didn’t even have to stop and think before answering. “When God reaches into a heart of sin and replaces it with love—that is God’s greatest miracle.” I see it happen every day, and each time it is as real and powerful to me as the day I experienced it myself.

People need Jesus, and God wants you and me to lead them toward him. We are the ambassadors of the Holy Spirit, living and working in Satan’s playground, and all around us are lost and hurting children, longing to find their way home. There is no greater feeling than taking a child by the hand and leading him into the arms of Jesus. Nothing could possibly compare!

READY FOR SERVICE

But what does it take to do that? What does God need us to do and be in order for him to use us to reach a lost world?

I’m convinced that before any follower of Christ can make a serious impact on humanity, she must exhibit three critical qualities of servanthood. Three character traits that not only allow God to work through us but serve as lightning rods for souls needing salvation.

The first is *passion*. A passion for Jesus and a passion for those who need him. A passion that goes far beyond what the church and the world are accustomed to seeing—beyond mere excitement and into the realm of fanaticism.

The second is *mercy*. A merciful heart is a critical ingredient in the life of a follower. If we can’t learn to see people the way Jesus sees them, to love them with the same love he has shown us, to serve them the way Jesus served during his days on earth, to care with the same compassion that drove Jesus to his death on the cross...if we can’t develop that kind of mercy, we will never be able to reach a lost and dying world.

The third is *vision*. Each of us needs a covenant with God—a mission, a purpose, a clear sense of our gifts and talents and our true calling in the kingdom. You and I were created with a specific need and assignment in mind, and God has been preparing us to fulfill the mission that he set in place before we were born. But how seldom we seem to find our purpose. How seldom we embrace the vision that God has set before us.

Passion. Mercy. Vision.

Three qualities that should be standard ingredients in the life of every follower. Three traits that every believer needs in order to make a serious impact on the world. Three necessary elements for developing a soul obsession in the depths of your heart!

Stay with me as we explore each of these three elements deeper.

But if from there you seek the LORD your God,
you will find him if you look for him with
all your heart and with all your soul.

DEUTERONOMY 4:29

Come with me and see my zeal for the LORD.

2 KINGS 10:16

Now devote your heart and soul to
seeking the LORD your God.

1 CHRONICLES 22:19

They broke bread in their homes and ate together
with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoy-
ing the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to
their number daily those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:46-47

And hope does not disappoint us, because
God has poured out his love into our hearts by
the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

ROMANS 5:5

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"
made his light shine in our hearts.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:6

NAKED FAITH

Long before I was able to comprehend the relentless love of God, I felt it. Though I could never quite assimilate it in my mind or grasp it with my understanding, I could sense it in my heart. Still today I struggle to define it, yet it is as real to me as the air I breathe and the water I drink.

This love affair began the day I accepted Jesus into my heart at the age of nineteen, but it didn't really take hold in my spirit until many years later. And it happened in the most unlikely of places.

I was twenty-seven at the time and had been booked to speak at a crusade in Albuquerque, New Mexico. As a young evangelist in the beginning stages of a new speaking ministry, I wasn't yet used to the loneliness of life on the road. It was late at night, and I was staying in a small, dingy motel room that consisted of a bed, a lamp, and a tiny bathroom. Nothing else.

I was in prayer, asking God to give me the words I needed for my sermon the next evening. My normal routine was to read my Bible for a time and then stop and pray that God would speak to me through the words,

give me some kind of insight and guidance. I prayed mostly that he would bring to my mind those things I needed to say in order to best minister to the people attending my crusades.

Even though I was young and new to the evangelistic circle, God was using me more mightily than I had ever imagined possible. Everywhere I spoke, waves of people would come forward to receive Jesus as their Savior. Every speaking engagement proved to be more powerful than the last, and in my heart I knew it had nothing to do with me. In fact, my accent was so thick that many who came forward hadn't understood half of what I had said. Still they found themselves under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. It was clear that God was moving before me; only he could bring so many to their knees in repentance. I never once thought otherwise.

As I was praying under the dim light of that tiny hotel room, I suddenly felt God's presence as powerfully as I had ever experienced it. At first I wasn't sure what was happening. A feeling of love and intimacy began to sweep over my spirit. I sensed a closeness to him that transcended anything I had ever felt before. It was as if God had reached out and wrapped his large arms around me, drawing my head to his chest. I could all but feel him holding me, smiling at me, putting his hand over my heart.

I began to cry, softly at first, and then uncontrollably. His nearness was almost too much to take in. At that instant I recognized my complete and total dependence on him. With rivers of tears flooding down my face and sobs heaving from my breast, I cried out, "I love you, God. You are my Lord, my King, my power, my only strength! Without you I am nothing!"

For what seemed an eternity I sat weeping, resting in the arms of God. I was like a child who had crawled into his father's arms, and now I wanted nothing more in life than to be held, nurtured, loved as only a father could.

Nothing else mattered. Nothing could come between us. Everything was exactly as it should be.

I wanted to stay there forever.

BEGINNING OF AN AFFAIR

Throughout my walk with God, he has used times like these to reach down and draw me nearer to his love, strengthening my heart and life, building on the romance that began the moment I gave my heart to him. That day in the hotel room was only one of many times in my life when God showed me how much I needed him—and how very much he cared. I've learned that I can always depend on him, that he is always there for me, even when it seems he isn't. Sometimes *especially* when it seems he isn't.

I've learned through the years to trust God completely with my heart and life, to trust him with my relationships, my marriage, my children, my ministry, my finances, my future. And he has never let me down. Never have I put a care on his shoulders that he couldn't carry. Never have I given him a problem he couldn't fix. Never have I spoken where he wasn't there to listen.

I remember one instance, years ago, when I needed God desperately. Our ministry was still small and struggling financially. We had always worked on a tight, shoestring budget—we still do—but for some reason funds were getting tighter than ever. People were not giving, and what little we had in reserve had completely dried up.

Often we spend more on our crusades than we receive in contributions. We almost always have to pay the difference out of our limited operating capital. We don't cancel when this happens; we trust that God will make up the difference. He always has, and I know he always will.

This particular time, we had just completed a large crusade and were forced to empty our account to pay for the balance on the arena and other expenses. We had only a few hundred dollars left in the bank for payroll and rent and any other needs that might come along. It so happened that we were having our annual board meeting that week. I knew I needed to discuss this problem with our board of directors.

We got together on a Friday afternoon, and I informed them just how dire the situation was. We needed around forty-three thousand dollars by Monday to make our payroll and pay our rent and light bill for the month. That would leave no extra funds, but it would at least see us through the crisis at hand. The staff was already aware of the problem, and many wondered if they'd still have a job by Tuesday. It broke my heart to see them worry.

Several on the board suggested that we get out some emergency letters and phone calls to our larger givers in order to inform them of our need. Maybe one of them would come through for us, we reasoned. Others suggested going to a bank for a loan, but we quickly ruled out that option.

After several hours of discussion, I said to them, "If God wants this ministry to survive, he will come through for us. I'm not going to write any letters and beg for money. God is the only one we need to go to. He's aware of our problem, and that's where we need to leave it. If this is God's ministry, he will give us what we need."

The board agreed, and we spent the remaining time in prayer before disbanding for the weekend.

That evening I went to dinner with the board members and tried to put the problem behind me, but it persisted in my mind. I couldn't seem to feel at peace. I trusted God, but I also felt responsible for my staff. I

couldn't bear the thought of letting them go, of disappointing so many of our faithful co-workers, of seeing the ministry fold, of losing what we had worked so hard to build.

I don't always share financial problems with my wife, Gloria, but that evening I told her how desperate things were. I had considered taking out a second mortgage on our home to pay our staff, and I knew I needed to let Gloria know our situation. I wanted to prepare her for the difficult times that could be in our future. We prayed together, and she told me I shouldn't worry. I knew she was right, but still I agonized.

I spent much of that evening in prayer, pleading with God to come through for us, to help me feel at peace, to give me a sign that he is in control. Yet I felt nothing. I listened for God, but no word came. I wondered if he might be angry with me, if maybe our ministry had done something to offend him, yet I couldn't think of anything. I begged him for a sense of his presence, for even a hint of confirmation, yet nothing came. I prayed that Monday would never arrive. I couldn't bear the thought of facing my staff with so much uncertainty in the wind.

I barely slept that night. Much of the next day I put up a good front, but my spirit was deeply concerned. *Why does God feel so distant?* I thought. *Where is he? Why can't I find any peace?* It was one of the most agonizing and introspective days of my life.

A BREAK IN THE CLOUD

Saturday night, after dinner, I was lying on my sofa in the family room when suddenly I felt a deep urge in my spirit. God was calling me to pray. He wanted me to get alone and talk with him. Without speaking, I jumped

from the sofa and ran to our bedroom. Closing the door behind me, I sat on the edge of the bed and began talking to God.

“Sweet Jesus, you know I’m yours. You’ve always been faithful to me. I have a wonderful life. You’ve given me Gloria, the best wife any man could have. You’ve given me four wonderful children. I’m the most blessed man on earth, and nothing that happens can make me forget that truth. But right now I’m confused and tired and worried. There’s so much uncertainty in my spirit. I don’t know what’s going to happen with the ministry—*your* ministry—that you’ve entrusted me to watch over. Have I done something wrong? Do you have other plans for me? What am I supposed to do, Lord?”

“Jesus, I stand before you with nothing but a naked faith. Nothing else. I have no idea what to do, but I trust you completely. Show me the way, Lord, and I promise to follow.”

As I sat pouring my soul out to God, I could sense his presence. His peace filled the room and enveloped my spirit. I began to cry as his tenderness overwhelmed me. I could almost feel his heart next to mine. And I listened as he spoke into my spirit.

Nicky, he said, I know you are caught up in fear, but I have never let you down. I’m not through with you yet. You’ve done nothing wrong. Nothing is going to happen with your ministry. Trust me.

For the next hour I sat weeping in the arms of Jesus. I thanked God for his goodness, for giving me a sense of peace, for telling me that everything was going to be all right. I knew that I had no more worries. He would come through for me, just as he always had.

From that moment on my attitude completely changed. I no longer fretted. I slept so well that night that I jumped out of bed early the next morning and couldn’t wait to get to church to worship God. Gloria couldn’t believe the change in my demeanor. The worry was completely gone. I had

no idea how God was going to fix the problem; I just knew that he would. I couldn't wait for Monday to see what God would do.

WAITING FOR A MIRACLE

I can still remember the sense of uneasiness among the staff when I walked into the office Monday morning. I could tell they had all spent a weekend of worry, and I tried my best to calm their fears. "Don't worry," I told them. "God will come through for us. You'll see."

I couldn't explain my sense of comfort, but I had absolutely no doubt that God would fix our financial problem. I didn't know how he would do it; I just knew that he would. We had never received forty-three thousand dollars in contributions in one day, and we all were aware of that fact. Most of our funds came in through small contributors who were far from wealthy but helped us with ten, twenty, or fifty dollars whenever they could. God would have to work a mighty miracle for us to be able to continue our work. I felt badly that my staff was so concerned, but my spirit was completely at ease.

The mail almost always came at noon, but this day it was late. I remember my secretary checking the window every fifteen minutes, watching for the mailman. Two o'clock rolled around, yet still he hadn't come.

Just before three, my secretary walked into my office with tears running down her face. The mail had just come, and the staff quickly opened it. She held in her hands two checks. Both were from large contributors whom we hadn't heard from in some time. The checks totaled fifty-seven thousand dollars.

Both envelopes came with nothing but simple notes inside explaining that God had put it on their hearts to send us a check.

I gathered my staff into my office and we said a short prayer, thanking God for bringing such a wonderful gift. He had given us even more than we needed.

A GOD OF GUTS

God has a way of taking our moments of deepest confusion and doubt and using them to strengthen our trust and dependence on him. He takes our seeds of faith and turns them into a tower of conviction and confidence. When we are most perplexed, he is most in control. When we are weakest, he is strongest. When we need him, he is always there.

David Wilkerson, my friend and mentor, is a living testament to this truth. More than any man I know, he trusts God implicitly. He never allows confusion or doubt or other people to steer his decisions. Every worry, every question, every moment of concern is placed at the feet of Jesus until he hears an answer. He listens to God and God alone. That's why God has used him so mightily in his life and ministry.

David Wilkerson was just a country preacher from Pennsylvania when God spoke to him and told him to go to New York and reach out to the gangs. He had been watching a news program that discussed the rampant gang problem in the inner city when God spoke to his spirit and told him to go. No one could imagine this skinny preacher being able to reach such a hardened group, yet he obeyed and went.

I'll never forget his boldness in the face of such danger. He stood alone on the street corner and talked about Jesus with nothing but a Bible in his hand while we laughed and taunted him. I was only nineteen at the time and a warlord of the Mau Maus, the most brutal and notorious gang in the city. None of us could believe this strange little man dared to venture onto

our turf to tell us about God. Any one of us could have cut him to shreds without losing a moment's sleep over it. We were convinced that he was crazy, that he had no idea how much danger he was in, that he would never have come if he had known how little we respected human life.

But we were wrong. Not only did he understand the danger, he welcomed it. He had no fear, no worry, no doubt that God would protect him. God called him to reach out to us, so he came and stood three inches from hell and threw his fishing line over the edge, laughing at the devil every step of the way. Wilkerson trusted God completely, and nothing we could do intimidated him.

We hurt him, cursed at him, humiliated him, screamed in his face, yet he kept coming back. Wilkerson's courage in the face of danger was the one thing that intrigued me enough to attend his service. I would never have stepped foot into a church building had I not been so fascinated by his guts, his complete disregard for his own safety. *What would make a man do such a thing? What kind of God would give a man such confidence, such trust, such gumption that he could walk into the middle of hell and stare down the devil himself? What would make a skinny street preacher think he could come onto our turf and tell us what to believe?*

I had to know, so I went to his service. And that's when God grabbed hold of my heart.

There, in the middle of St. Nicholas Arena, in front of hundreds of strangers and dozens of my fellow gang members, I fell to my knees before the altar and surrendered. I bawled like a baby in front of my friends. I cried out for Jesus to save me, and he did. I gave up trying to do it on my own. I looked at David Wilkerson, at the love in his eyes, at the peace in his spirit, at the courage in his heart, and I knew that I wanted what he had. This was a God I could worship. This was a Jesus I could relate to.

This is the kind of faith that I want to live with—that I want to be willing to die for!

LIVING A NAKED FAITH

So many people think that my passion for Jesus comes from years of study and prayer and ministry, but they are wrong. It comes from seeing God come through for me during those times when life has left me completely exposed and alone. It comes from feeling God's presence during moments of my greatest confusion and despair. It comes from seeing God's hand before me, time and time again, in the face of unimaginable danger.

Every time I stand face to face with a hardened, teenage gangbanger, I see Wilkerson fearlessly preaching on the corner of my street. Every time I walk into the middle of a crime-ridden, drug-infested neighborhood, I feel the same strength that drove Wilkerson to the streets of New York so many years ago. Every time I hold a lost and hurting soul in my arms, I feel God's power and presence.

I depend only on God. God has used the pain of my past to take me to a deeper level, to bring me closer to him. What Satan intended for evil, God has used for his glory. Any joy I receive in life pales in comparison to the ecstasy of seeing God accomplish the impossible, watching how he reaches into a dark heart and brings light, how he spreads his mercy like butter across the sins of those who need forgiveness.

It's so easy to intellectualize God, to acknowledge his power without ever experiencing it, to believe in his supremacy without ever calling on him to do mighty things in our presence. We see him with our minds but not our hearts. We never embrace the power that we preach to be true. We never call on God to move mightily in our presence—to take our ounce of

faith and use it to lift a mountain off of its pedestal and hurl it to the bottom of the sea!

Naked faith demands that we somehow learn to marry the mind and the spirit. That we put away our pride and doubt and fear and stand before God, empty and broken, with nothing but a raw and unquenchable trust. That we close our eyes and ears to the voices that tell us what God can and can't do, what God does and doesn't believe, how God does and doesn't work, and allow God to show us for himself.

God wants us to move past our doubts, to crush our fears, to forget the natural and move instead into the world of the supernatural. Stand on this truth, believe this truth, embrace this truth, and you will see miracles! You won't see God, but you will feel him. You can't brush his robe, but you can smell him as he passes in front of you. You can't touch his face, but you can experience his power.

You can't see him with your mind, but you can see him with your heart.

My trust is often blind but never irrational. It seldom makes sense but always brings results. It can't always be explained, but it always feels right.

If I had one message to shout from the rooftop of every church building on the planet, it would be this:

God is bigger than your doubt!

No matter how grim things look, no matter how much pain you feel, no matter how confused and tired you may be, trust him. He will take your naked faith, no matter how small, and create a miracle bigger than you've ever dreamed or imagined.