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Unleashing the Word

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PART ONE

MY
STORY



CHAPTER ONE

HOW I GOT STARTED READING SCRIPTURE ALOUD



DURING MY CHILDHOOD, I was quite interested in the idea of God—and a little frightened as well. I grew up in a nominal church-going home, but when I was about fourteen, I made a clean break from anything to do with Christianity. During my college years, I even dabbled a bit in Eastern mysticism.

After college, I was attracted to a Christian woman named Sharon, and we began dating. I didn't really understand her faith, but since I was interested in spending time with her, I would accompany her to church from time to time. She introduced me to some of her friends who were studying the Bible together.

Though I wouldn't normally have any interest in studying the Bible, for some reason, I felt compelled to attend one of their sessions. They had a guest teacher that evening, and I distinctly remember that the teaching failed to engage me. But I found that I was drawn to the Bible passage being read. It was from Galatians 1. The word *Galatians* meant nothing to me at the time, but I remember the words of those verses hitting me in a passionate and forceful way. Prior to that night, I had never been confronted by the power and insight of the Bible. Something was changing.

From that moment, I began to see God working in my life, bringing what I would later come to understand as a conviction of my sins. At first I just wanted to run away, but where can you run to get away from

God? I began reading the Bible for myself, something my nominal faith tradition had never emphasized, and I ended up reading John's gospel in one sitting.

As I read the gospel, it was almost as if I could see, feel, and experience it in my mind's eye. I felt like an eyewitness as Jesus was stepping out of the pages of my Bible.

Prior to that night, I had never been confronted by the power and insight of the Bible.

By the time I got to the passion narratives and the crucifixion, I was in tears. When I read about the resurrection, I felt an inexplicable joy overwhelming my entire body.

At that moment, I knew two things. The story of Jesus was true, and my life would never be the same again.

Today, I recognize that time as a work of God's Holy Spirit, illuminating the words of the Bible, making them come alive, and changing me from the inside out. Since that time, I've seen it happen time after time in the lives of countless people. The words of Scripture are powerful and life-changing, breaking through to the hearts of those who are ready to receive it.

DRAWN TO THEATER

Shortly before meeting Sharon, I had developed a desire to act. I had always had a social phobia when it came to being in front of people, a carryover from my childhood. So during college, I had started acting as a way of overcoming that fear, and it had grown into a love for the stage.

I was born in Panama City, Panama, and I first came to America at the age of four, arriving at the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. My dad served in the military, so we moved quite a bit growing up, living in places all across the continental United States, the Far East, and Europe.

I think I was attracted to the theater because I had a strong desire to express myself, and acting was able to draw that out of me. I enjoyed connecting to my inner emotions and then expressing those emotions in a controlled way in front of others. As an actor, I knew I was still pretty raw and that I would need a lot of work in the various acting disciplines. That included vocal training. My voice was stuck in a limited range, and it was affecting my ability to accurately express my thoughts and feelings. I planned to do some postgraduate work after college at a drama school in London to develop those skills.

My spiritual birth the year after I graduated from college did not derail those plans at all. In fact, after that experience, I was even more energized than before. I was certain that God would use my training in the dramatic arts, even though I wasn't at all sure how. In 1978, I completed my postgraduate degree in theater and then did some work on the stage in Great Britain, in New York City, and in regional theater.

During this time, Sharon and I got married and started our family (we now have two lovely daughters). Before long, I began to realize that my life as an actor was little more than serving as a hired hand. My job was basically to communicate, as brilliantly as possible, the ideas of other people, regardless of their message. I found it both demanding and unfulfilling.

While I was struggling through this dissatisfaction with my work, God was calling me to experience more of him. He was teaching me that “no one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24). Eventually, I felt compelled to leave the theater and abandon acting altogether. (This was my personal pathway, but this book will not argue that people need to leave their primary work or be trained in theater in order to read the Bible effectively.)

FIRST READING IN CHURCH

Looking back, I know that my departure from the theater at that time was from the Lord, but it still left a huge void in my life. I didn't know what I would do. To fill that void, I became much more active in my local church in Chatham, New Jersey, which was part of the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination. My pastor, Paul Bubna, preached the Bible with great conviction. He also invited outstanding guest speakers to preach on a regular basis. Over time, I was exposed to great preaching and Bible teaching. I began to enjoy listening to audio tapes of other preachers on my commute to work. I found myself being moved by the insight from their sermons and the conviction in their voices. The way they connected with the Bible and were able to inspire and exhort others intrigued me. Their personal devotion to the Word of God enabled them to communicate with such power that I found it riveting.

I remember my first one-on-one meeting with Pastor Bubna. It was in the spring of 1980. I was still a fairly new Christian. We had breakfast together, and he asked if I would read the Scripture for the following Sunday during the service. It was 2 Peter 3:10–15.

I wanted to do it well, so I rehearsed it carefully. The process of meditating on the Scripture as I prepared to present it really opened me up to receive what God was saying. The text began to warm my heart. That morning, I was asked to sit at the front of the church with the pastor. What an honor that was! I was nervous but also very excited. As I did the reading, I noticed that the congregation listened with unusual attention.

The feedback after the service was immediate and widespread. Their eyes and the gratitude they expressed were a great encouragement to me. So many people I had never met thanked me profusely for allowing them to receive the Scripture in a new light. It was a life-changing day. Little did I know at the time that the Lord had taken away my theater career so that he could use me in an entirely new way.

So many people I had never met thanked me profusely for allowing them to receive the Scripture in a new light.

In part, the response from the congregation came because my reading was such a stark contrast to what they were used to hearing. Most weeks, the pastor would have the elders pray with him before the service, and then he would ask one of them to read the passage that morning. None of them really had time to reflect on the passage, much less to practice it. These were mature Christians, but few of them had any gift for reading the Scripture aloud to the congregation.

During this time, the Lord gave me another experience that had a profound effect on my life. The church had invited an evangelist to speak at a men's missionary breakfast at 7:30 on Saturday morning. When my alarm clock went off at 6:30 that morning, I almost turned it off, thinking "I'm not going." But for some reason, the Spirit just wouldn't let me off the hook. So I went, dutifully, but without much expectation.

I was in for a big surprise. The speaker was a young evangelist whom I had not heard of. When he started to speak, all my senses lit up. Never before had I heard such dynamic passion and sheer logic combined into a single address. The man's name was Ravi Zacharias (who wrote the foreword to this book). His talk was the most intense, fast-paced, alarming, and at times humorously engaging speech I'd ever heard. I know I didn't fully understand what he was saying, but I did sense that I was in the presence of someone who spoke for God at a deep, profound level.