

Brokenness to Fresh Outpouring

When a Pastor Gets Desperate

By Nathan Lino

I was a broken man. My church was broken. I was in the most difficult season of my life.

And out of desperation, I found myself praying the same cry every day: “Lord, I need You to rescue me and redeem my church—or let me come home to heaven today.”

Like most churches, COVID took a toll as our Houston, TX, church had to go online in March 2020. We faced never-before-seen challenges. The following month, my father-in-law passed away during the COVID lockdown. His death was not only the closest and most personal death I had experienced, it also triggered complications that created significant challenges in our marriage.

A month later, the price of oil crashed. For our Houston economy, it was disastrous. Church leaders suggested we might need to cut as much as 40 percent of our church budget.

Just as we were trying to deal with a newly depressed economy, that summer a national racial divide erupted in our country. The national divide was similarly reflected in my congregation. Our people suddenly had pastoral expectations and demands of me that were unrealistic. I am a pastor, but I am not an expert in all things.

To add to the stresses imposed by a society that seemed to be falling apart, another personal tragedy struck when one of our church planters was run over and killed by a semi-truck. His death deeply affected my wife and me, as well as my

responsibilities as the senior leader of the larger organization of our family of churches. I was suddenly responsible for pastoring my own congregation while caring for another congregation that was now not only recovering from the pandemic, but also the sudden loss of their beloved pastor.

After six months of major crises hitting in waves, I felt like I was drowning under the ocean. I was broken and finished. I was desperate.

I cried out to God for rescue. It was a desperate cry that was personal, but also on behalf of the life of our church family.

Missing Presence

Simultaneously, I realized my congregation was also broken. As we reemerged from the lockdown, we had people, programs, and money, but I could not sense the presence of the Lord in our church. I believe the Church is “the people of God gathered in the manifest presence of God.” And when either is missing, it’s broken. The temple lays in ruins.

That’s when I began to pray my most desperate prayer: “Lord, rescue me and my church, or let me come home today.” And I meant it.

I prayed that prayer every day for a month without sensing God responding at all. At the very end of the month, for the first time, I felt God respond. And I had this premonition in my heart, “Go read *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* by Jim Cymbala.”

I remember thinking at the time, “That cannot be of God, the book is so old.” But I ordered the book. It so gripped my heart that I read it in one sitting. It’s the story of a desperate pastor leading a broken church who had come to the end of himself. When they didn’t know what to do, they just started crying out to God for a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit.

The next Sunday, I stood in front of my congregation and poured out my heart. I told them that “things are broken. We are dead. And we need a miracle.”

Corporate Call to Prayer

I asked my congregation to set aside every Tuesday from September through December. And on every Tuesday, I wanted them to fast and pray—and for all who could, to end the day together in a prayer service.

“For four months,” I explained, “we are going to fast and pray and ask God for one thing: We want a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit. We want more of the presence of God.”

I added, “We are not going to ask Him for stuff. We don’t want more money, more people. We’re not going to ask Him for anything but Him—and as much of Him as He’s willing to give us.”

That’s what started a whole movement.

That first Tuesday, we had a small number of our people show up. It was more than I expected, but it was still just a fraction of our congregation. So, I stood up the next Sunday and appealed to my church again.

“Look,” I said. “We need a miracle. I need you to hear me. And I need you to come.”

I was just so desperate. And that desperation became contagious. Our prayer meetings started to take off. By the fourth Tuesday night, we averaged 45–65 percent of our congregation joining in corporate prayer each week.

Supernatural Shift

As our church gathered to pray, the Lord taught us about the necessity of depending on corporate prayer as much as we depend on proclamation of the Word. We maintain our high view

of Scripture, but we now also elevate corporate prayer to the same level as the public preaching of the Word. They are equally critical to the life of our church.

As soon as we elevated prayer, we noticed a heightened, supernatural presence of God. We started watching people voluntarily repent of secret sin, even though we were not emphasizing repentance. More than ten couples confessed adultery to their spouses, in some cases a secret kept for more than a decade.

We started seeing physical miracles. Houses that weren't selling suddenly found buyers. People who couldn't get jobs were now offered positions. People caught in addiction were set free. We witnessed more than ten medically verified healings from diseases.

People started showing up on Tuesday night to get in the one-on-one prayer line. One parent requested prayer for the heart of an adult child (living in another state) to be turned from stone back to flesh. Within 24–48 hours that child's heart had been transformed.

Families surrendered to the call to be missionaries overseas, and men committed to stepping into pastoral roles. Couples in divorce proceedings reconciled.

Soon, we experienced elevated numbers of salvations and baptisms. In those four months, Jesus saved 174 people and many were baptized. And from January to the spring of that year, another 195 people gave their lives to Christ!

When we decided to make the public preaching of the Word and corporate prayer the two equally important priorities of our church family, it's like the Spirit just—whoosh—showed up!

Encouragement to Pastors

When I look back on my seminary days, I can remember hours and

hours of instruction about interpreting and teaching Scripture. But I struggle to remember a professor teaching extensively about preparing and leading prayer services. No one taught me how to lead a corporate body into the presence of God.

So, as an encouragement to pastors, I know probably one of your primary fears and struggles with all of this is: "How do I lead a corporate body into the presence of God and to sit there and stay there? I know how to lead myself into the presence of God and stay there, but what about a whole body of believers?"

I didn't know how to lead in prayer either. All I know is that Scripture emphasizes the pastoral call to devote as much time to planning and leading corporate prayer meetings as preparing and preaching sermons. The apostles figured this out quickly in Acts 6:2–4 (emphasis mine):

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them *and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.*"

When I realized my desperate need for God's intervention, the Holy Spirit took over and led me to people like Jim Cymbala and others who taught me the skills to lead people in corporate prayer.

Trust the Spirit. He wants your church to be a house of prayer more than you do. If you will just lock it into your heart that you will marry yourself to your church becoming a house of prayer—and stake yourself and your church to that—the Spirit will guide your steps to the people and resources. He wants you to encounter Him so that He can equip you to lead

your people into the presence of God and sit there.

Going All In

That August, when I was a broken man and praying every day for God to let me come home to heaven, I read Isaiah 32 in my quiet time. God says to His people (my paraphrase):

“You think you’re fine, but you’re not. You have money. You have relationships. The lights in your home are on. You’re having birthday parties and festivities. You think you’re fine, but what you haven’t realized is, I’ve left the building. You are not filled with Me anymore. And you’re going to realize that down the road in a painful way, or you can realize it now.”

But God says to His people in Isaiah 32 (again, my paraphrase), “So if you right now will begin to fast and pray and ask Your heavenly Father for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and if you will keep on praying for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a fresh filling in your heart and in you as a people, your Father will give you this. And when there is a fresh outpouring of the Spirit, there will be fresh righteousness.”

There will be fresh justice.

There will be fresh joy.

There will be fresh peace and quiet and security.

Our only response needs to be, “Okay, God. I’m going all in.”

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