

Chapter 1

Busy and Barren

It was another Monday morning, and I was inching along Central Expressway toward downtown Dallas and the busiest schedule you can imagine. Once again, my eyes clouded with tears as I sat immobile in the snarled traffic. Why was I so miserable? Why were tears becoming an almost daily experience?

What made this condition all the more perplexing was that I was already doing all the “right things” the Christian world said I should. I studied the Bible extensively, memorized hundreds of Scriptures, witnessed to everybody I met, and prayed constantly. My church commitment was total—I was there Sunday morning, Sunday night, Monday night for visitation, Wednesday night, plus other times for innumerable committee meetings. There wasn’t much more I could do in church.

But that’s just the beginning. I was also in full-time Christian service, with the emphasis on “full-time”. I was teaching in a Bible college and serving as minister of evangelism for one of the largest churches in America, while at the same time serving as president of a ministry which I had founded. I was writing Bible-study books, doing a daily 15-minute radio broadcast, and teaching seminars all over Dallas and around the country. Busy? You better believe it!

My frustration had nothing to do with a desire for the world’s goods. I had tried all that long ago in the business world. For all of my adult life to the age of 36, I worked to become a millionaire, seeking meaning and purpose to life in things. But that didn’t bring satisfaction. I then became the owner of my own thriving business, thinking that what I needed was to be my own boss. But that didn’t change anything either. I socialized and even hobnobbed with Hollywood celebrities. But I found that they were just as empty as I was. I called it a life of “cars, bars, and movie stars.” But I still wasn’t happy or fulfilled.

Then, through a dramatic series of events, I learned that Jesus Christ had died for my sins and was raised again so that I might experience God's forgiveness and a new life in Him. At that moment, I turned my life over to Christ. I prayed, "Lord Jesus, if You can change me, come into me and do it. I sure need to be changed."

And He did! For the first time in my life, I discovered what it was to experience love. God took a marriage that was headed for the rocks and put us back together. I learned for the first time the joys of being a father—I had always been too busy before. No longer was I wrapped up in myself in a headlong drive for success. I became more concerned with giving other people the greatest message ever known to man and introducing people to the same Lord Jesus who had changed my life. Each day became a thrilling adventure. I had never been happier.

But that was eight years ago. What happened?

The tears only intensified, flowing freely down my cheeks as I reviewed my life. I thought again of the words to a song by Andraé Crouch: "Lord, take me back to the days when I first knew You." My heart was crying out to God as I softly sang the song to myself.

It didn't make an ounce of sense. A few years earlier, my Christian life was vibrant, alive, thrilling. Now it was tied up worse than this freeway traffic, bogged down, and barely inching along. Where had I gone wrong?

Today, I realize my experience was not unique. As I talk with Christians all over the country, I hear them asking "What's wrong?" Many of them are doing all the "right things," just as I did. Yet they feel like they're racing madly on a spiritual treadmill. They're highly active, but going nowhere.

Many go from seminar to seminar, tape series to tape series, book to book, desperately trying to find the missing link that will make the Christian life really work for them. Our generation has more Christian learning resources available than any generation in history. But I have to ask: Are we really better off? Are we more joyful? Are we more faithful? Do we have a deeper experience of God and His love?

It reminds me of a remark made to me by Major Ian Thomas:

"If an unbeliever were to walk into a Christian bookstore, he would see the shelves just blanketed with "how-to" books—everything from how to run a Christian business, to how to lead a Christian exercise class, to how to cook a Christian dinner. His response would probably be, "Don't you Christians know how to do anything?"

I have to agree with Major Thomas. I think we have strayed far from God's real priorities for us. With all our "how-to" resources, I believe we have forgotten how to *live*. We have forgotten that the Christian life is *Christ*, not just a change of lifestyle. But, straying from Christ Himself as our life, we have no other option than to substitute furious activity and service. It has gotten to the point where, to be a member of many churches today, you don't need to pass a doctrinal exam; you need to pass a physical! Sheer physical endurance has become more essential than spiritual enlightenment to assume a position in leadership.

God began to get my attention through an occasion that I will never forget. Mac, a hard-driving, tough businessman in his 70's, had been a church member for many years. But one Wednesday night as he heard me share my personal testimony, he realized that he had never personally trusted in Jesus Christ as his Savior. Though he had been involved in a lot of religious activity, he never really had a clear idea of what it meant to be a Christian.

After spending a few days pondering and asking me questions, Mac made up his mind. At the Sunday night service of our church, he decided to come forward to make a public profession of his faith in Christ. I was down at the front serving as a counselor, and I was deeply moved by the sight of this tough old businessman coming forward to receive Christ in childlike faith. We were both in tears as we stood before the pastor.

"Bob, this is tremendous!" the pastor exclaimed. "This man is one of the most brilliant businessmen in our city! He's wealthy, he's talented, and we need to put him to work! I want you to see that Mac is totally involved in what you're doing. We want to take full advantage of what he can do."

I will never forget Mac, his eyes full of tears, speaking with a sincere, trembling voice: *“Pastor, I don’t need a job. I need the Lord.”*

The instant I heard Mac’s reply, I knew that he was speaking with greater wisdom than he could have been aware of. And I also thought to myself, “Maybe that’s what is wrong with *me*.” My Christian life at the time did feel more like a job than a relationship.

I have heard the same sad admission from many other Christians, too. Someone experiences a genuine conversion to Jesus Christ that results in immediate changes. But there seems to be something lacking in knowing how to live from that point. He dutifully obeys the instructions that other believers give him, and jumps onto the treadmill of service. It isn’t long before he discovers that no amount of service—sincere though it may be—will make a person spiritual. In desperation he redoubles his efforts but, like a person struggling in quicksand, it seems that the harder he tries, the deeper he sinks.

Other people get bound up in fear and guilt, effectively frustrating their personal growth. Mary, for example, wrote to me about her experiences:

I was brought up in a strict denomination where I learned to be afraid of God. I’ve gone to many churches since becoming a born-again Christian, talked with many pastors, have been sent to many doctors, counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists. You name it, I’ve been there. But it wasn’t until I started learning of God’s grace and total forgiveness that I started to become free....Now I am no longer carrying the burden of sin on my back, constantly looking over my shoulder to see if God is running after me with His great wooden spoon.

I have learned that this experience Mary describes is shared by many other believers. Like children living under hyperauthoritarian parents, they live in a state of constant worry that they will suffer the application of God’s big wooden spoon. Consciously or unconsciously, they live by a list of rules. When they keep those rules, they are “okay.” When they slip, they get ready to bend over. As a result, many born-again Christians live in terrible bondage, constantly worrying if they are obeying the right rules or doing the right activities to please God. An oppressive burden of guilt becomes their normal, everyday experience.

We don’t necessarily recognize these people as hurting. On the outside, they may be smiling,

repeating the usual Christian clichés, and performing the expected church functions. But inside, they know they are putting on an act. They would love to be free of the burden. They deeply desire to share their fears, pains, and doubts, but don't for fear of being condemned. So they suffer their own silent condemnations, wondering if God will ever find it in His heart to accept them.

Just recently while teaching a Bible study series on dealing with fear and anxiety, I asked the class to write down their answers to this question: "What are you afraid of?" Among the many predictable responses were a few that were heartbreaking. One person described his greatest anxiety as "The fear of not getting right with the Lord and continuing to live a lie." After many years of being a personal counselor, I can tell you that this anonymous writer is not done.

Is this, then, what Jesus had in mind when He talked of an "abundant life"? No! But if people have never experienced anything different, they will accept their predicament as normal. They will assume "that's just the way it is."

A vivid example comes from the childhood of my wife, Amy, who grew up in the Russian Ukraine during the famine-stricken years of the 1930s. Amy never had a pair of shoes until she was 8 years old. Then one exciting day someone came up with a pair of old, used shoes that they thought she might be able to wear. She crinkled up her little toes to get her feet into those shoes, which were too small for her. "How do they fit?" her mother asked.

"They fit great!" exclaimed little Amy with a big grin. She was so thankful to have any shoes at all—plus, having no previous experience, she had nothing to compare them to. So she said thank you and ran off to play. For a long time afterward, Amy's definition of the word "shoes" would have been something like this: "They're those things that make your feet hurt, but enable you to go outside and play in cold weather."

Then the day came when she finally tried on a pair of shoes of the proper size. Amazing! They didn't hurt anymore. It dawned on her that what she had always accepted as normal was not normal at all—that shoes could be made to fit and to make your feet feel better.

I believe this story illustrates the lives of many Christians. Obviously, knowing we are going to heaven when we die is better than uncertainty and the fear of judgment. But we have come to

expect very little from the Christian life down here on earth. We settle for being a sort of “second-class Christian.”

When you are hearing all about what you *ought* to be experiencing but aren't, you feel trapped between two choices: Either admit the truth and be embarrassed or put up a front and pretend you are doing great.

If you have ever felt caught in this dilemma, I have got great news. The Christian life really *isn't* a matter of perfecting your acting ability. It *can*

be real! I know your hurts, because I have been there. But in this book I'm going to share with you the truths that God has used in my life to set me free. It took me several years to learn these things. Much of what I now know, I learned the hard way—through personal failure. But those lessons are often the ones that are most valuable over a lifetime.

It was that very day while I sat stranded on a jammed freeway that God began to lead me to the answers I was looking for. I remembered a statement that Jesus made: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32 NASB). It occurred to me that if “truth sets you free” the opposite also had to be true. Error puts you in bondage. Identifying this principle was a significant turning point for me. *Truth sets you free, error binds you.*

My keen mind quickly identified the fact that I was certainly not free! There could be only one reason why: I was living according to error rather than according to truth. Therefore my next thought was to ask the obvious question: “In what areas have I fallen into error in my Christian life?” I thought back to those early days of knowing the Lord when I was fresh and eager, and compared them to my present experience. In many areas, there was a sharp contrast.

Some of the issues involved were things as fundamental as my approach to Bible study. When I received Christ at the age of 36, I immersed myself aggressively in the Bible. For several months, my wife thought I had a black-leather face! I was always in the Word. But over time, my sincere love of Christ became overshadowed by my increasing theological knowledge.

In my preoccupation with God's Word (which was certainly good in its initial form), I failed to see something. Jesus never said the Word would set us free. It's the *truth* of the Word that sets us

free. Jesus said, “If you abide in My word...you shall know the *truth*, and the *truth* shall make you free” (John 8:31, 32 NASB). He went on to say, “So if the *Son* sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Where does the truth of the Word lead you? To the Son!

I knew the Bible frontwards and backwards, but that knowledge alone didn’t change my condition. In my experience, Jesus got lost in the Bible. I remembered how He had said to the Pharisees.

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about *Me*, yet you refuse to come to *Me* to have life (John 5:39, 40)

I remembered a phrase that was very popular in evangelistic appeals. It was the answer to a common non-Christian comment—“I don’t like religion.” The comeback is, “Christianity is not a religion; it’s a *relationship* with God through His Son Jesus Christ.” That phrase is absolutely true. But I saw with amazement that, while I continued to quote it in situations where I was sharing Christ with an unbeliever, in my own life I had strayed from my relationship with God back to practicing a religion!

I longed for the joy I had experienced during the first two years of my Christian life. In those days, I often awoke at 4:00 in the morning—and I’m not generally an early riser—to pick up the Bible and enjoy an intimate time with my heavenly Father. No one told me to do that. I *wanted* to do it.

During those first two years as a Christian it was a joy just to be alive. For the first time, I was discovering what it means to really love my family. I spoke to business groups about my faith. I taught Bible studies. I would make a \$20,000 sale in my business, but be more excited about the chance to tell the customer about Jesus.

What a contrast to my frequent tears on the Dallas freeway during rush hour just a few years later. What had gone wrong? It seemed that the excitement started to slip away after I sold my business and went into “full-time” Christian work. It was obvious that my heart was no longer in business, and what could be better than doing full-time what I enjoyed doing as a businessman? I thought I had attained the ultimate—a life totally dedicated to the ministry.

But somehow it was never quite what I expected. I still taught Bible studies. I still shared my faith. But it became more of a performance. Instead of doing it because I wanted to, I did it because I was expected to do it. Someone reminded me to make sure and have a “quiet time” every morning. I had to fill out reports, indicating how many people I shared Christ with and how many Bible studies I was leading. My joy ebbed away, and those activities became more mechanical. The early-morning times with the Lord that I enjoyed so much became less and less frequent as other things began demanding my attention. After having led hundreds of people to Christ as a businessman, I found myself losing interest in talking to people about the Lord. Don't get me wrong; I still experienced a tremendous thrill when someone was born again. But when you have lost the joy of your salvation and have begun sharing Christ out of habit, competition, or just plain duty, there is no relish in it and not much to keep you going. After all, what can you say? “Become a Christian and be miserable like me”?

I thought of the challenge that initially had drawn me to full-time ministry. “Come Help Change the World.” I had responded to the challenge and jumped in to help change the world. But I don't think the world changed much.

After a couple of years of service in southern California, I was sent to Dallas to head up a major, citywide evangelistic campaign. For three years, I poured my life into that cause—to help change Dallas. But when the campaign was over, I had to admit that Dallas really hadn't changed.

After considerable evaluation, I decided that what was really needed was a ministry to help change the church from within. I started training leaders who would in turn train other leaders in the local church. I became director of evangelism for one of the world's largest churches. But soon it became obvious that I couldn't change the church. In fact, it was becoming more and more ludicrous to think about changing anything around me *when I couldn't even change me*. If I couldn't change me, how could I possibly think I was going to change the world?

There was another error that was binding me. As I thought about it, I finally realized that Christ

didn't call me to change anything; He called me to proclaim truth!

It's no wonder I was frustrated. I was pursuing a goal that God never gave me. In that pursuit of a goal that God never gave me, I had absolutely lost the joy of knowing Him. What was once the overflow of my experience of God's love had become just an external performance. I was totally committed to God's

plan

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of the plan. I could deny it for a while, but I wanted reality too much to keep up a pretense for long, even with Christians applauding, patting me on the back, and telling me how well I was doing.

Well, I was tired of it. Just plain sick and tired of being sick and tired. I wanted to experience again the joy of my salvation. As I pulled off the freeway and drew near to my office, I prayed a simple prayer:

Lord, I don't care what the organization that I used to be with taught me. I don't care what the church I'm in or the denomination to which I belong has taught me. I want You to teach me afresh, all over again. I want to know the truth that You promised would set me free. I'm tired of listening to people. I'm ready to listen to You.

Today, several years later, I can tell you that God is more real to me than I ever dreamed possible. I now enjoy genuine freedom through understanding who I am in Christ. My relationship with God is now even more exciting than when it first began in 1969. Ironically, I'm probably just as busy, or busier, than I was before. But the work of the ministry is no longer a burden; it's a joy! I'm no longer trying to change the world or anything else. I am content to let God work through me to produce whatever results He pleases.

In this book, I'm going to share with you what I learned.

If you have ever felt that your Christian life is more like a job than an adventure; or if you have ever found yourself saying, "There's got to be more to the Christian life than what I am experiencing"; or if you are *not* a Christian, but a seeker who has been confused by the bewildering denominations and factions, who wonders if there is a "real thing" at all—I invite you to join me on a journey. It's the journey I took through the Scriptures and through real-life experiences. A journey to discover not just the *words* of the

Bible. A journey to discover the *truth*

of the words in the Bible. More than anything else, I wanted to know more fully the Person of Jesus Christ whom the Bible reveals. I thank God with all my heart that He led me to find what I was looking for—a return to Classic Christianity. It's my prayer today that you, too, will discover *or rediscover* the real thing.

The passages we examine may be familiar to you. You may already know many of the verses by heart. What I hope and pray you find in this book is the *truth* of these verses that will set you free. I pray that your eyes will be opened and that you will see all the incredible gifts God has chosen to give to those who love Him.