

TURNING SORROW
INTO JOY

A JOURNEY OF FAITH AND PERSEVERANCE

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WITH KEN ABRAHAM



Turning Sorrow Into Joy:

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CHAPTER 1

I've Got Nothing!

THE SIGHT IN FRONT OF ME WAS AWESOME. Seated alone on an isolated wooden stool located offstage on the large, elevated platform, I peered out and saw more than 130,000 people in the audience. In a few minutes, it would be my turn to address the huge crowd at The Return, a gathering of people from across the country held in September 2020 on the National Mall. Our purpose during the two-day event was to focus on God and “return” our nation to its spiritual foundations through repentance and prayer. The crowd stretched back across the grass for as far as I could see.

I had been praying all day about what God wanted me to say, but with only minutes to go before I was scheduled to stand before the throng of people, I had nothing. I had no prepared speech, no message, no notes, and more important, no sure word from the Lord that I sensed I should speak.

Earlier that day, I had walked along the Potomac River and through some of the streets of Washington, DC, praying and asking God for wisdom, trying to sense His leading. By now, I realized how enormous this event truly was, with multiple thousands gathered on the National Mall and literally millions of people watching online.

And I had nothing.

I had no specific message that God wanted me to share.

That is not a comfortable position for any preacher to be in, but that tension is amplified when you know you are going to be speaking to multitudes of people who are expecting to hear something good. I had arrived in Washington the day before, on Friday; I checked in at my hotel and then went over to the Mall to hear some of the more than ninety speakers who were scheduled to share a message with the crowd that weekend. I was disappointed. Although there was great music and several anointed words, the leaders seemed obsessed with making public apologies regarding the church's supposed failures, both past and present. We apologized to nearly every racial and ethnic group or minority I'd ever heard of and some that were totally foreign to me. I left the Mall frustrated at what I had heard—not a call to repentance that would lead to revival but merely a mishmash of spiritual navel-gazing that made the body of Christ sound almost silly.

Yes, of course, we needed spiritual renewal and revival, but we were still the bride of Christ and the only hope for the world that Jesus offered. So why bludgeon the believers? It made no sense to me.

As I returned to my hotel after Friday night's session of The Return, I wondered, *Why am I even here? Why did I come to Washington?*

On Saturday morning, I walked up near the stage and listened to Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham. Anne brought a powerful and anointed message, and I sensed the presence of the Lord. I felt better about what the day might bring. *I almost wish I could get up there and speak right now rather than wait till later*, I thought. But my assigned time was still nearly ten hours away.

That afternoon, as is my custom when visiting cities in which I am to preach, I walked the streets, hoping to catch the "spirit of the city"; more importantly, as I walk I often receive messages from the Lord. Occasionally, I have written down messages the Lord has given me and then later delivered the prophetic word, but most of the time when I get a prophetic word, it is spontaneous and "in the moment," something that God gives me to say right now. I have no idea that it is coming. The prophetic gift functions quite differently than the process of studying, preparing a sermon, and then preaching it.

Often as I am preparing to preach, a message will marinate in my heart and mind all week long, usually intensifying as the speaking opportunity draws nearer. But prophetic words operate differently. I don't plan for them or prepare for them; I don't ruminate about a subject and think, *Oh, yeah, that will be just what the people need. That must be what God wants me to say*. Instead, prophetic words are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and they come almost unexpectedly—even to the person who is delivering the message.

On Saturday evening, I arrived in plenty of time at the greenroom, a tent near the stage where the scheduled speakers could relax, catch a bite to eat, or engage in conversation together before their turn onstage. I recognized several of the notable ministers, including a number of nationally known Christian leaders, such as Carter Conlon, who now pastored Times Square Church, which David Wilkerson, founder of Teen Challenge, had pioneered in inner-city New York in the 1980s; Tim Hill, general overseer of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) worldwide; Puerto Rican evangelist and former gang member Nicky Cruz; and many others. They didn't know me, but I recognized them. As a relatively unknown, struggling pastor of a church with fewer than one hundred members, I felt somewhat out of place and didn't really engage anyone in conversation.

I glanced at the television monitors showing the platform and the speaker who was preaching at the time. My impression was that most of the people in the greenroom were not keeping close tabs on what was happening on the stage but were simply enjoying the spiritual atmosphere.

About an hour prior to my designated time to speak, the stage manager summoned me and accompanied me to the large stage. Backstage, on the right-hand side, at least thirty or forty people were milling about, including musicians, stagehands, sound engineers, production managers, and ministers. It was a flurry of activity. I glanced at one of the monitors onstage and noticed that the person speaking was scheduled only a few minutes in front of me.

A female stagehand came to find me among the group, and she guided me behind the staging area to a stool on the

opposite side of the platform. “You can sit right here until it is your time,” she said.

I sat all by myself on the stool and prayed, but I still wasn't getting any message from God.

It was nearly dark by now, and the crowd had already been on the Mall that day for more than ten hours. Ricky Skaggs, multiple Grammy Award-winning country music artist and a fellow Nashvillian, sang two moving songs that he and hit songwriter Gordon Kennedy had written. He then led the entire audience in singing two old but powerful hymns, “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less” and “Nothing but the Blood of Jesus,” two segments before my designated time to speak. Focusing on Jesus seemed to set a different tone, then another minister stood to exhort the crowd.

As I sat on the side of the stage and looked out at the massive crowd, I glanced at my phone and noticed that I had received a text message from Phil Cappuccio, founder of Sound of the Trumpet Ministries in northern Virginia. Phil and I had become friends nearly thirty years earlier and had reconnected within the five years or so before *The Return*. His first wife had died in his arms after a long bout with cancer, and he was now married to a woman who worked in the nation's capital. They lived in the Washington area but were unable to attend *The Return*, so Phil had contacted me to let me know he was praying for me. Phil shared my commitment to speak only what the Lord instructed, so I knew he would understand my dilemma and would pray earnestly.

I quickly typed out a response to him. “I've got nothing. It's going to be really good or really bad.”

The stage manager motioned in my direction, beckoning me to the podium. It was time for me to speak a message, and I still had nothing. But I knew how to pray. I thought, *I'll just stand up and pray for our nation*. I walked to the podium and opened my mouth.

No one, not the people on the Mall that day or the millions who have heard my words since that moment, was more surprised than I was at the message that came out of my mouth.