

A Higher Experience

By Tom Stephens

It was an experience beyond anything I could have ever believed, which opened up a vast new world before me. This experience so shocked me that, with the touch of Christ Jesus, I cast away a two pack a day habit, stopped drinking, cursing, and changed my focus to identify with my Redeemer, who then led me to 'search the scriptures' for His will in my life. I knew the revelation I received that eight hour period of my life was much too vast; much too eternal for mere man to counsel.

My spirit was full of awe for this Man Jesus who loved me so much.

Yet, it seems to me the most expressive and intensive growth in Jesus has been the past ten years. It's an awesome walk and I am continually amazed at His presence in my life. Where Satan spreads disease, Jesus brings back health; where the enemy, in a rage, orders his imps to destroy lives, Jesus mends the same. Yet the kind of healing Jesus brings comes only to those who humbly come before His presence.

I needed that kind of healing in my spirit and my soul.

Because mine was a dysfunctional family, I quit school in my senior year in High School. Shortly after, I remember going by my girlfriend's home to hang out with her. She had other things on her mind, however. With sadness in her eyes, she handed to me my high school ring and said, "I'm sorry, but dad and mom do not want me to take dating this seriously. They believe I should give this ring back to you."

Our meeting was short and sad, so I began walking back toward my home on the other end of town.

On my way, I met up with a friend who had previously quit school. When he drove up, he rolled down the passenger window and hollered, "Hey Tom. Come with me. I'm going to Lubbock to enlist. What do you think about that?" Considering the most recent events of my life, with anger boiling inside me, I said, "Let's go!"

In a few weeks, we both were in the Fort Ord, California reception center, eating Uncle Sam's mess.

I was no angel. I was part of a dysfunctional family, and I'd been known to yell at my dad in public... words and phrases most military men didn't want to hear. I prided my 120 pound frame in exercising strength battles against other GI's in my platoon, and often winning. I got myself into a few situations where my bluffs did not get me very far, especially with men double my weight. I began writing to my old girlfriend and thought we were doing fine, but she never really got over me leaving for the Army without telling her, so I got this "dear John" that said "it's over for good, and I'm serious about this navy guy who I met a few weeks ago."

That was on Friday evening after basic training was over, and I was assigned to a regular unit. I

was angry. . .and not used to drinking hard liquor. But I did that night—almost a fifth all by myself.

The only thing I remember that weekend was a shower forced on me by my peers. I never before in my young life felt so deprived as I did during that weekend. Weeks later, I was shipped overseas to finish my tour of duty. I knew the Commander wanted me out of his company, and I couldn't blame him. I hated myself and my inability to become a productive part of my unit. But I learned a big lesson that weekend...to never put your faith in the ability to play with the world and come out spiffy clean. It has never worked out that way...and never will.

Before the Viet Nam war was over, I completed my service with the US Army. Though once saved, I had fallen away from the Lord in my teens; then after the term of military service ended, I became disillusioned in the things of the world, and began searching for a way back home.

At just the right time, God sent my family a time of fellowship in the form of a reunion. God met me and at least five of my cousins in a powerful and wonderful way...a way I will never forget. Here's what I remember: I lived with my mom and dad in Abilene, Texas, and was scheduled to work that Friday. So mom and dad went Friday morning to the reunion, and I was to drive up the following day. I remember the trip as a preparation of my soul prior to the reunion, as I hungrily listened to gospel music on the radio the two and a half hour trip.

Not long after arriving, an ex-husband of one of my aunts showed up unannounced. Another aunt immediately took opportunity to minister to this estranged family member. Listening through a doorway were at least 6 or 7 youths, including myself. Aunt Jean had ministered to my brother and I over the years by God's precious Spirit as we were growing up. Her own sons, five in all, ranging from pre teen through their twenties, were standing with me listening to this powerful message.

As Aunt Jean witnessed to this lonely ex-uncle, God's Spirit began moving in my own heart. My eyes began to tear up, though I fought these emotions stirring me. When I finally looked around, every one of my young cousins were affected as much as I. We were visibly stirred as we sat a minute on the beds wondering what must be next. Then as if God's Spirit began intervening, we all seemed to know what to do.

There was an upper floor in Grandma's home which had been vacant many years, so we decided to go up stairs and find the Lord anew. Each of us was weeping by the time we got upstairs; I was afraid because I was not used to the terrible guilt I felt, and the tremendous urge to let it all come out. Then, following the example of my more experienced cousins, I began to open my heart to the Lord. He ministered to us in a very sweet way that warm, August day in 1966. I was delivered from the power of hell that evening and I remember throwing a pack of cigarettes across the room. When God delivered me from cigarettes, He also completed a physical work of healing which had been caused by alcohol consumption—and a spiritual walk with Him began.

I had arrived at Grandma's house about lunch time that Saturday and by 10 p.m. was a changed person. Jesus Christ had this date recorded from the foundations of the world, for nothing happens by accident. He foreordained these hours of my life and determined I was to belong to

Him for the remainder of my life on earth. He has convinced me of His love, and of all His earthly benefits, love is the only thing that will remain and abide with us throughout eternity.

I spent the rest of that year preparing to attend Southwestern Assemblies of God College. I was 25 and knew Jesus had His hands on my life. I met my future wife that first semester while ministering on the streets at Dallas Teen Challenge.

God showed us many things about the poor and hurting, the diseased, and those who were involved in crime during our work at the center. Linda and I worked on the streets each Saturday evening while a college friend and I worked as live-in counselors during the summers. I cannot explain the great times we experienced when God's Spirit would come down and minister to our hearts. There were also the times we were reprimanded as a body of misfits...just as Israel was for so many years in the desert.

Linda and I were married while at Southwestern A/G College where we had our first two children (now a University where three of our four children attended at one time or other).

I graduated and we moved to New Mexico where we pastored for a few years, and had our other two children (twins). We later moved out of the state to Pastor an A/G church in Texas, and finally moved back to New Mexico to pastor in a small town on Interstate 25. This is where I determined in my heart that, even though I felt a sweet anointing, my calling was not to the pastoral ministry.

I attempted to run by getting secular employment but found the pull to Jesus Christ too great to resist.

During the mid nineties, when Brownsville Assembly of God Church was in revival, some of our people out here in desolate West Texas visited the Church in Pensacola, Florida, and because of that, great manifestations of the early church began taking place among our people and in each of our lives during a very special six months of precious revival in our hearts.

We saw most of the miracles of the early church during the six services per week. I remember coming home from work, reading the Word a few minutes before supper, and heading joyfully off to another very long night of praise, ministry of the Word, worship and deliverance. Did we get tired? No. I don't remember even once being too tired to meet with God in that Holy Place. I know you have been to services like that ...where you sit in His presence afterward... not wanting to leave the precious and Holy place where we were... often saints would have to be ushered to their homes because of being "drunk by the wine" of the Holy Spirit. That was a few years ago, but we have never been the same.

One short testimony before I close: about six years ago I was on a plane at the Midland terminal, waiting to fly to Houston for a few days of training. The Holy Spirit came upon me, and I began speaking in tongues under my breath because I didn't want to disturb anyone. This Spirit of the Lord remained on me for the duration of the trip.

I realized while on the plane that God had placed the protection of one of His angels on me.

When I arrived in Houston, I didn't have enough cash for a taxi for the ride to the hotel (the airport was far on the South part of Houston, and my hotel was on the far North loop.) Because of a shortage of drivers, the taxi let me out at another hotel about ten miles from where I was supposed to be. Wondering what I would do in this dark area of downtown Houston, I got off the taxi and immediately saw a passenger van pull up behind us. Written on the van was the name of my registered hotel. With thanksgiving in my heart, I knew that ride was an answer to prayer in the Spirit, as many things can happen to a person stranded in downtown Houston.

In recent years, my wife and I have been involved in the local Foursquare church where we have been blessed in the teaching ministries, both in Sunday School and sometimes on Wednesday evenings. During the late 1990's, God began dealing with me about placing ministries on the Internet. That dream from the Lord is coming to pass at this time.

When I retire from my job as a probation officer, where I also find times of ministry, God will show me where He wants me.¹

Our ministry will not end till we go to be with the Lord Jesus.

Blessings from Tom @
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¹**Update.** While my wife, Linda is employed by a local judge, I am retired with a great future in Christ Jesus; only, at this time I look forward to two things—to enjoy the rest of my time with my lovely wife, and then to meet Jesus in the air, either at the Rapture of the Church; or to be resurrected to join with my spirit in heaven, where I will be forever with Christ Jesus. Whew!