



ALL THINGS LOSS

Prosperity's Delusion
Salvation's Reward

A Novel

Steve Phillips

All Things Loss

Prosperity's Delusion - Salvation's Reward

A Novel

By Steve Phillips

Copyright 2001 by Steve Phillips

Cover Artwork **Copyright 2014 by Patricia Phillips**

ISBN 978-0-9769695-9-4

First Edition, 2001

Second Edition, 2014

All rights reserved

This book has been copyrighted to prevent misuse. No part of this book may be reprinted or translated without written permission from the publisher.

A composite English translation of the Bible has been used throughout.

Published By

Polyventure Publications

Union, Washington, USA

polypubs@hcc.net

Under an exclusive agreement to print and distribute in Nigeria with:

Plumline Media & Publications

P.O Box 5, Ughelli, Delta State, Nigeria

plumblinemedi@yaho.com

Tel: 070 697 65293, 081 719 34132

Printed in the Federal Republic of Nigeria

1

Another Sunday.

A cock's shrill rasp mingled with the rise and fall of the mosque's whining Arabic told him it was near 5:30. The wife stirred beside him, sighing but sleeping still, while crowding anxious thoughts raced without seeming direction through Femi's heart in the pre-dawn stillness.

One tumbling upon another as if in a conspiracy of turmoil, each presented itself and fled, leaving only a pained prodding in passing. He did not know how it began or why, and to control it, he could not.

Something was wrong, disturbingly wrong. He had spoken about it to no one; not to his beloved Blessed and certainly not to his General Overseer, The Rev. Dr. Benson. What could he say, anyway? Confusion clouded his mind while a gnawing distress, like the steady drip of acid, eroded his composure and confidence.

Panic, that desperate hopelessness, swept over him leaving his forehead beaded, his hands clammy. Swallow as he may, the mouth would not moisten and refresh his thickened throat.

What is happening? The hollow unanswered anxiety monotonously re-echoed itself. *Has God abandoned me? Have I grieved away the Spirit? Am I backslidden?* There was no reply, no relief, only an abiding uneasiness remained.

Suddenly, a flicker of hope flashed amidst the grip of despair enveloping him. Prayer, yes, let me pray. Surely that will deliver me from this attack.

Enlivened with renewed expectation, silently, Pastor Femi slipped from the bed and moved noiselessly through the darkness to the parlor. There, closing the door so as not to disturb his sleeping Blessed and children, he sought his refuge.

"Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus. Eternal rock of ages, great King of glory, I worship You, I adore You, I glorify You, I magnify You. There is no other God but You. O God, hear my prayer, in the name of Jesus.

"All foul spirits of confusion, I bind You. O you wicked ministers of doubt, I rebuke you and scatter you, in Jesus' name! I send you back, I shatter your plans, I destroy, I shred, and banish you to infernal pits, in the name of Jesus.

"I soak myself in the blood of Jesus. I cover myself with the blood of Jesus. You shall not prevail. No weapon fashioned against me will prosper." He was pacing the floor now, fists clenched with wide sweeping motions while his head rocked and bobbed with increasing agitation.

"Holy Ghost fire, fall! Consume the devils! Burn up all foul messengers of discouragement. Lying fiends of hell, the Holy Ghost rips you, the Divine acid of heaven consumes you. You are finished, in Jesus' name!

"I decree, you are finished! I decree, you are finished, I decree, be finished, in Jesus' name. I confess, I shall live and not die, I shall live and not die, I shall live and not die, in the name of Jesus!

"Thank You, Father. Thank You, Lord. Thank You, Jesus. For it shall be well. It shall be well. It is well, in Jesus' name! Amen, Amen, and Amen, in the name of Jesus."

Stained with sweat, his prayer came to an end, but his problem did not. It was not well. No, not at all.

Yet for some time, he would imagine that the victory had been gained. The exertion of his energies and enthusiasm of his efforts glazed his perception for a season. Indeed, even a sense of elation coursed through him.

But it was nothing more than a raw emotionalism mistaken for spiritual vitality. Anyway, he felt better at the present. Beyond that, he cared not to reflect. His prayer, more of a religious imitation than actual prayer, had issued in no insight entering his heart.

It was how his life had been: seeking solutions, but not a Savior. Satisfied with superficiality, he rarely considered anything deeply, being content with momentary consolations. But, unknown to him, God Himself was turning his world upside down for Femi's everlasting good.

“You’re up early,” a quizzical glance from Blessed as she entered the parlor expected a response.

“Eh... oh... yeah... I was just praying,” he paused briefly, “preparing for the Sunday service, you know,” his voice trailed slightly and eyes shifted from her own at the last statement. An odd second’s of silence followed.

“Uh, what’s for breakfast?” was the overly light-hearted inquiry.

“Nothing new: akara and pap, as usual,” came the studied response. She held his gaze only just longer than needful before turning to the kitchen.

Femi remained in the parlor’s gradually graying gloom. His former exuberance dampened, a creeping disturbance resurrected afresh. Ignore it, he could not: bury it, possibly.

That was his unsettled determination. He would simply press on. *After all, I’m a pastor. It’s Sunday. What else can I do?*

And, with that, he busied himself with routine petty pursuits prior to the worship performance looming before him.

2

“Shout seven mighty hallelujahs!” bellowed the Rev. Dr. Benson’s raucous voice from his over-amplified microphone. Like so many dutiful bleating sheep, the response resounded beyond the sanctuary walls from the gathered throng.

With a grin bordering on greed, the Reverend strutted the stage and chuckled into his cordless mike, “The Lord is good!” Immediately, from hundreds of smiling uplifted faces, the united chorus rose, “All the time.”

They were expectant. Perhaps today. Their breakthroughs had been promised for long. It was why they were there.

It was why Femi and Blessed were there. Though they had never actually voiced it aloud, they knew it was the reason. They had never discussed it, not from a sense of shame, but because it was an assumed perceived fact intuitively discerned as can only be done between husband and wife. It was apparent to both, though others would not have guessed that of them.

Weekly they shouted, pranced to the praise and worship’s driving drumming, and rocked, sweating, as the litany of prayer points predictably rolled off, one by one. They were fully immersed in the church: Sundays, and with its demanding nightly programs.

“Praise the Lord!” it was Benson again, the dynamic force behind the church. “Hallelujah!” echoed thunderously the expected rejoinder. “We thank God for the testimony of this sister. Are we glad?”

“We are glad!”

“I said, ‘Are we glad?’”

“We are glad!!” the volume had grown by thirty percent.

“How glad?”

“Very glad!!!” they were fairly shouting it by now.

Benson was a master at arousing an audience to a fever pitch. It was always good for the offering.

Without a second’s pause, Sister Suki rang out the chorus in her clear throbbing way. The band quickly followed her lead as she danced her way to the altar’s voluminous offering box.

The congregation enjoyed her and watched admiringly her swaying sonorous performance, joining in at the appropriate points as they danced forward, row by row, with their offerings.

Rev. Benson smiled his approval, rhythmically clapping his hands in satisfaction at what he saw: money and Suki. He had chosen her carefully as part of his team of workers as all of them had been. He knew what he wanted, and selected every program and each individual for that determined purpose.

~

“I think we’re all here,” it was a matter of stating the obvious, not a question. The Rev. Dr. raised a penetrating glance at his assembled workers across his massive polished desk top.

“Yes, Sir,” came the instant reply from the junior church assistants gathered for their weekly pre-service briefing. Five pastors, one sound and lighting technician, the head usher, and Suki, the choir director, all attentively awaited their instructions. And given they would be.

Benson was all business as he swiveled his towering leather armchair to face each worker. It made him appear bigger than he really was. He liked the impression that made upon those seated across the distance separating them.

The AC hummed a quiet coolness into the air. Their feet were pillowed on plush carpet with minerals at their hands. On large overstuffed executive sofas of the finest design sat his workers. They ought to have been quite comfortable. But they rarely were.

Stiffly, it was always with a nervous unrest that they entered the Reverend’s private chambers. He was not the type to draw one close. Even the placement of the furnishings communicated that.

“I think that all of the equipment is in order,” it was Benson’s way of making a point that he expected nothing less.

“Yes, Sir. The generator has been serviced and fueled. All spotlights were tested this morning with no problems,” was the efficient reply of the technician.

“What of the sound systems?” Benson interrupted him.

“All is well, Sir. The directional mikes for the choir are all in place and adjusted and your own is at full capacity with no distortion. And, Sir,” he hastened to add so as not to provoke a second interruption, “the keyboard synthesizer has been calibrated and will be carefully monitored throughout the service.”

A short nod from the General Overseer signaled his acknowledgment of the report. The sound man shifted slightly, but not more comfortably, having passed yet another inspection.

“We want the first two rows filled with only the most important guests,” Dr. Benson rotated at the helm to engage the eyes of the head usher, “and with no names missing from the register,” the implication of the tone could not be misunderstood.

“Uh, yes, Sir,” she managed to reply through a flush of embarrassment, “We, uh, have the velvet cords in place to rope off those rows as you’ve directed, Sir. I’m sure all will be fine, Sir,” she sounded more hopeful than confident.

Ignoring completely her comments, his attention was absorbed in the financial report before him. Really, this was the main focus of the meeting as far as he was concerned. All was silent except for the pensive tapping of the Reverend’s fingernails on the glass top of his desk.

“Femi, the tithe report shows a slackening off among the congregation. What do you plan to do about it?” the attitude was more accusatory than inquisitive.

Somewhat taken aback, Femi tried to quickly think of a solution. It was not something he was very successful at, thinking under pressure. He voiced the only thing that came to mind. “If

I may, Sir, I can notify the individuals on the report that have been unfaithful," it was a weak solution, but he didn't know what else to say.

"You do that. This morning you will also be responsible to raise the tithes and offerings during the service. Give them a strong warning about what happens to those who don't bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. Understand? Good," he had not waited for an answer. There was none needed or expected. The President and Founder had spoken.

Femi only nodded, but managed a "Yes, Sir," so as not to show disrespect. Benson had already passed him by and moved on to the other things on his mind. Tilting back slightly in his throne-like chair, he inquired in a tone approaching pleasantness, "And what of you, Sister Suki, what do you have for us this morning?"

"Well, Sir," she spoke softly yet with unmistakable confidence, "the choir is prepared with the special number, 'Born Again to Win,' and I'm personally ready to do anything else you'd like," she replied with a smile.

You couldn't help but like Suki. She was extremely talented, godly to all appearances, and strikingly beautiful. There was a sense of poise combined with an easily perceived purposefulness about her. It afforded a cautious attraction to her person: an allurements to both draw near but to maintain a distance at the same time. Perhaps this was why the congregation found her fascinating.

"Good, good," it was almost a complement. "Yes, there is something else I'd like. We're having three separate offerings this morning; a thanksgiving one following a sister's testimony, our usual one for tithes and offerings, and a special seed-faith offering after the sermon.

"We want moving choruses to prompt them to give as they should, all to the glory of God. I think you're most suited for this important ministry."

"Thank you, Sir. By the grace of God, I'll not disappoint you or the church" was the sweet response.

"Pastors Chide and Joseph, you'll be responsible for gathering and accounting for the offerings this morning," Dr. Benson never placed money into the hands of one man alone. Money was too important to entrust to any one single person, except, of course, himself.

"Yes, Sir," they chorused in unison.

"And Emmanuel and Peter," he rotated the captain's chair to make his point, "you'll be the ones to follow up on all important visitors this week."

"Certainly, Sir," Emmanuel answered for both.

And so, the briefing concluded. Input was rarely, if ever, solicited from his associates. Effortlessly, the executive chair rolled backwards and the President rose to his feet. The rest, taking their cue from their chief, followed suit.

"Let us pray." The heads lowered and their eyes closed. They all knew that it was the Reverend who would lead them. The prayer itself was more of a formality, a "Christian" way to round up the proceedings. But there was nothing unusual to them about it, they simply followed their leader.

It's why they had been chosen, because they were followers. They asked no questions and were expected to initiate nothing. Everything came down from the top in the Rev. Dr.'s empire.

Benson's approaching voice rounding the corner of his desk, signaled that the prayer would momentarily come to an end. The realization brought relief, not because they were disinclined to pray, but that they would be released from the briefing.

"Praise the Lord!" It was over. "Hallelujah!" came the grateful reply: grateful for a variety of reasons. With the customary, "Thank you, Sir. We're grateful, Sir," the team proceeded to the door, filing out one by one.

From behind him, Femi overheard the Reverend call to his choir leader, "Ah, Sister Suki..." Before he could conclude with, "I'd like to see you privately for a moment," Femi had fumbled his Bic and turned to pick it from the floor. What he saw in that brief instant alarmed him.

Benson had taken Suki by the hand with more than a fatherly affection. Their eyes testified that they were both pleased with the touch, that is, until they noticed Femi glancing in their direction.

Hands instinctively released their hold, smiles faded, and three pairs of eyes met for only less than a second. Without one word between them, his Bic recovered, Femi hastened to complete his exit from that scene.

It had all happened so quickly and unexpectedly. Femi sought to dismiss it from his mind as nothing, really. *Things like that happen every day. It's a purely natural way to get someone's attention and delay their leaving a room. What is wrong with me? How could I imagine that it was anything else, especially about my General Overseer and this fine sister?*

Doubts began to assail him afresh in a replay of earlier that very morning. *Didn't I bind these spirits of confusion this morning? Sure I did. I must be backslidden then.*

He didn't know what else to think. The other alternatives seemed sheer impossibilities. But he was not one to reflect for long or deeply upon much of anything. The urgency of the moment led him, once again, to simply press on.

He would soon be required to exhort the congregation about tithing. He had very little time to put that together, and, as he was all too well aware of, he did not respond well under pressure. So, he simply dismissed it from his mind.

~

"Offering time!" it was Pastor Femi.

"Blessing time!" rumbled the customary rejoinder from the assembled multitude.

"Blessing time!" it was Femi again.

"Offering time!" chorused the liturgical reply.

He was doing the best he could. He knew little of the Scriptures and rarely studied them. His religion consisted of an assortment of imitated behavior gleaned from popular "Men of God." At the moment, he was a second rate copy of Dr. Benson.

"The Lord says, 'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse,'" he strutted about gesturing emphatically while rattling biblical sounding phrases off-head. "God says, 'Test Me!' That's right, 'Test Me!' You can force God's hand of blessing.

"He says, 'I'll open the windows of heaven for you.' Do you hear that? The whole tithe deposited into the church storehouse will provoke God to open His storehouse in heaven for you! Do I hear an 'Amen'?"

"Amen" most of the congregation responded.

"You sound like you don't believe it. I said, 'Do I hear an "Amen"?"' Femi roared, Benson like, into the mike.

"Amen!" they shouted. They had no choice. They knew what was expected, and thus played their part in the Sunday morning ritual.

"When God gets the whole tithe, you get the whole blessing. It's divine law. You do your part, and God does His. You can't find a better deal than that! Amen?"

"Amen!" they were getting into the spirit of things now, maybe even beginning to be convinced.

"But as with any law, there's a positive side and a negative side. Obey the positive, and you get positive blessing. Do the negative, and you bring a curse on yourself. It's the law.

"You're bound by it and God is too, because it's His law. If you don't bring the whole tithe, God can't help it, He has to bring the negative curse upon you.

"But are you here this morning to be cursed or blessed?" Femi was walking the main aisle now, beckoning with both arms to each side. "The Lord says, 'Behold, I set before you the blessing and the curse. Choose the blessing that you might live.' Repeat it with me, 'I choose blessing that I might live!' Again, 'I choose blessing that I might live!'"

They were chanting it rhythmically now. "Stand on your feet and say it again," he shouted over the din of the crowd. They rose as one man and increased their volume, continuing in cadence as Femi made his way back to the altar.

Suki met him there, and without missing a beat, struck out in her clarion voice the chorus to which they'd dance their tithes down the aisle. The band added their fervor to the event as Suki shook and swayed before them.

Benson was tolerably pleased and even nodded to his pastor a seeming approval as Femi took his place among the white plastic chairs in the front rows. It looked like it would be a successfully increased amount for the church coffers.

Femi stood and clapped along with the church, happy that his contribution passed inspection. It was one of his chief objectives, to please the General Overseer. His divine promotion and promised breakthroughs depended upon it.

Singing, dancing, jubilating with tithes in hand, the congregation crowded the aisles as they pressed forward, eager for the heavenly windows to pour forth. Unexpectedly, a small note was pressed unnoticed by others into his hand by someone in passing. Femi shifted so as to see who had done so and saw brother John gazing soberly back at him.

He liked John. There was something refreshingly genuine about his simple sincere faith. They had often discussed spiritual things together. They were enjoyable occasions, though his insistence that everything be based upon the Bible could be uncomfortable, even annoying, at times.

Femi quickly glanced at the short note. It simply stated, "Femi, read I Tim.6:5-11. John." *Huh, that's just like him*, Femi smiled as he mused over his friendship with brother John, *I'll look at it during the Reverend's sermon so I won't appear as if I'm not involved in the service.*

Spotlights played upon the Suki Singers and their carefully rehearsed rendition of "Born Again to Win."

"I'm born again, born again, I'm born again to win! From His house of lights, come divine rights. O, treasure without measure! O, I believe! O, I receive! I'm born again to win!"

With no improvement in lyrical content, the song proceeded through successive insipid stanzas. Truth was not the aim of the song, impact was. And Suki belted it out beautifully as only she could do with swelling harmonious backup from her choir.

With a rising crescendo of intensity, the congregation's emotions trailed along, mesmerized by Suki's moving sensually appealing performance. Her last full-throated note was held a full eight seconds after the choir and band had ended their own. The effect was electrifying.

A breathless suspense hung over the audience, uninterrupted by a single sound as the last echo of her final note faded into the walls of the auditorium. It was what every minister longs for: an entire congregation placed like putty into his hands.

The Rev. Dr. Benson took full advantage of the situation. He had already mounted the platform where he stood impressively behind the marble and glass podium. With an overly dramatic sober emotionalism, he launched into the climax of this Sunday's gathering.

"It is a divine truth of the greatest importance; we are born again to win! And I want to tell you this morning the most powerful principle that unfailingly produces prosperity for the people of God. It is the anointed principle of seed-faith planting.

"The Bible says in 2 Cor.9:6, 'He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.'"

Femi took this opportunity of the mention of a Bible passage to open his own to where brother John had directed him. He flipped the pages casually 'till he found the spot and began to scan the text.

Before he had finished the first verse, a deep conviction from the Holy Spirit Himself came upon him. By the time he had managed to complete the last verse, the same panicked beads of sweat from earlier that morning dotted his forehead.

Swallow he could not. He lost track of what the Reverend was saying in his total absorption in these few verses. *How was it that this Word had such power? Why had John given him this now at this time? Was he pointing these verses at him, or at Dr. Benson, or both?*

Femi didn't know. He only knew that his heart had been arrested by God Himself. This Word was like a fire burning in his bosom. He read it again from his NIV Pastor's Study Bible.

"Constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.

"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

"People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all

kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

“But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.”

“Men of corrupt mind think that godliness is a means to financial gain” Femi’s heart pounded in his ears, his thoughts racing. *“...want to get rich...temptation...foolish...ruin and destruction...wandered from the faith...flee from all this...pursue righteousness.”*

Like a burst-opened wall to a fetid dungeon, light and breath from heaven rushed upon him filling him with its blessed life. He heard nothing again of Dr. Benson’s discourse. His heart was elsewhere. He had no ear for anything but this Word of God to his soul.

O, God, I am the one! I’m the foolish corrupt man wandering from the faith! Be merciful to me, be merciful to me! I beg, forgive me, O, my God, forgive me! A tear dropped from his bowed head onto verse 5 of his opened Bible. A second splattered on verse 9.

Silently, he wiped them from this now precious text. “A means to financial gain...to get rich...” The truth, sharper than any two-edged sword, cut deeply, laying bare his thoughts and intents.

It’s true. I’ve used the church, no, I’ve used You, O, God. It’s really what I’ve done: used You to gain for myself. O, how wicked I’ve been! How shamelessly wretched! I cannot even raise my eyes to heaven. I can only beg for mercy.

Please, for Christ’s sake, take away my sin, take away this evil, cleanse me, O, my God, restore me, save me. Do not cast me away in Your anger, in Jesus’ name.

This was, perhaps, the first real prayer uttered from his heart. Up until now, his had been an imitation religion, a mimicking of learned behavior, a shell without substance. Today, a genuine work of God had begun in his soul. A long road lay ahead, but a solid step had been taken.

As if returning from a far place through dense fog, Femi refocused on his surroundings. They were unmistakably commonplace to him, yet somehow inexplicably altered, even odd. He couldn’t account for that sensation, yet it persisted.

What he didn’t realize was that, in many respects, he was a new man. He was listening to the Reverend’s message again, but with a new set of ears. What he heard was passing through a changed heart.

“Listen, Jesus said it: ‘A hundredfold in this life.’ Do you hear? In this life! Let me hear you say it, ‘In this life!’” Benson was stirring up the mob-mentality again.

“In this life!” rang the enthusiastic response. Femi had started to join in but restrained himself. *What am I doing? Is this really what Jesus was saying?* Shocked himself at this fresh inner resolve, he sat watching the Reverend’s performance with eyes of understanding which, before now, had not illumined him.

Marching among the aisles, arms flailing as if possessed of some profound mystery, the Rev. Dr. wound up the seekers again and again to chant “In this life!” at his command. Louder, and with increasing abandon, its mighty roar filled the sanctuary.

Then, timed to perfection, he was back behind the opulent lectern. With a solemnity approaching reverence, like the next words were delivered straight from the throne by Gabriel himself, he spoke slowly with dramatic conviction, “There is no more fertile soil to be found anywhere for planting your seed of faith than Christ’s Tabernacle of Glory.”

Without a moment’s pause, Sister Suki was on her feet, softly and slowly this time, singing a touching solo of worship. With her angelic notes floating through the charged atmosphere, she removed bundles amounting to ₦ 250,000 from her purse, laying all upon the altar in full sight of the congregation.

Her song continuing, Benson’s hushed but earnest voice came in upon this lovely background. “God bless you, sister, God bless you.” Turning to the congregation with the song of sacrifice continuing to beckon them, the Rev. Dr., with great emotion, implored them.

“You’ve seen with your own eyes this testimony of worship. I tell you, the Scriptures say, ‘with such sacrifices God is well pleased.’ It’s a sign of a soul that’s serious with God. By the anointing that’s upon me, I decree, ‘Your harvest shall be sure!’ in Jesus’ name! I say, ‘Harvest come!’ in Jesus’ name! ‘Hundredfold blessing, come!’ in the name of Jesus.

“What do you want from God? How big is your faith? This woman has laid her demand at the feet of Jesus. And I tell you today, the Bible says, ‘He will not delay long over her.’

“He will not delay long over you if you also will heed the command of God, ‘Go, and do thou likewise.’ Come and plant, come and sow. And remember, ‘He who sows sparingly, will reap also sparingly.’”

At that, Suki joyously broke forth in high gear with full choir and band blaring their support. The people rose, checkbooks and money in hand, rushing to plant their seeds of faith. They were convinced, already tasting of the hundredfold promised return.

Something like revulsion swept over Pastor Femi who, automatically, had already begun to shuffle his feet and clap to the pounding praise number. *Why, this is nothing more than a pre-arranged money-making scam!* And, indeed, it was.

~

“I like it! I so much like it!” Benson was eagerly putting ₦ 250,000 into Suki’s hands. It was why he had detained her earlier that morning in private. It was not his idea, but, when he understood it, he was delighted.

Actually, Suki had thought of it. “Reverend, if we really want to motivate the people to give large seed-faith offerings, don’t you think we should set an example for them?” Suki paused for him to reply.

“What do you mean, set an example?” Benson was always cautious when it came to giving rather than getting.

“We’ll just take ₦ 250,000 from the church funds, and bring it as our seed-faith in front of everyone so they’ll see it and want to do the same,” she spoke it more enticingly than casually.

He stared at her for a moment, then a glint of satisfaction shone in his eye as he asked, “And into whose hands should we place this money, may I ask?” it was a half-serious, half-teasing inquiry.

“Why, into mine, of course,” Suki smoothly answered with an inviting arch of her eyebrow.

Benson only grinned at the expected response, the cleverness of the plan, and her willing participation in it.

The matter concluded, they were on their feet now, proceeding to the office door when Benson slipped his arm around her waist. They paused and she did not resist. “You’ve used the word ‘we’ several times this morning,” it was an inquiring statement.

Her eyes smiled back into his. “I suppose I have, haven’t I?” her nose wrinkled at him in a promise of better things to come, and she turned and passed through the door.

The Reverend watched her go as she left for the morning service. *Yes, a good choice indeed. Of course, I always choose my assistants carefully.* He added the last thought in the self-congratulating arrogance which so much characterized him.

What he didn’t know was that Suki was even more careful in whom she chose to assist her.

~

The mockery of the morning message over, and the people milked dry of virtually every Naira in their possession, all rose to share the grace in fellowship. Femi mumbled along with the rest, hardly hearing a word that was said.

Immediately the band, at full speed and maximum volume, drove the people out of the building where they could at least hear one another talk. There, after a brief space, the sun’s intensity drove them to seek refuge from its relentless rays. Thus, another Sunday had come and gone.

The Rev. Dr. entered his Mercedes, ₦ 1.2 million richer from the morning’s round of offerings, while Pastor Femi proceeded by public transport to his house, no more richer, but justified.

Femi had received the better portion.

3

“U no tenk ah dey cook well, well fo u?” Blessed teased her husband in a half-irritated tone as she observed him obviously pre-occupied in thought.

“Ah, no, it de fine-O” Femi managed to gather his thoughts from afar, back to the meal at hand and his wife before him. “Sorry-O, I was just thinking.”

“Thinking about what?” she was really a good wife and usually had true interest in whatever Femi had on his mind. Encouraged by this, he decided to tell her.

“I was reading the Word of God during the service this morning and it made a great impression on my heart. Let me read it to you,” he pulled his Bible off the shelf and found the passage in I Tim.6:5-11. “Listen to this,” and he read it off.

When he finished, he looked up expectantly at his wife, anticipating the same impact upon her that it had made upon him. Her blank stare was all that met his gaze.

“Well, go on. Is that all there is?”

Confused now, not knowing why the verses didn’t smite her own heart with the conviction that came to his own, he stammered with uncertainty, “I... uh... I guess I was looking at these in a different way, that’s all.”

Not sure what he was meaning, Blessed looked at him quizzically. “How were you looking at them?”

How can I explain it? I don’t even know what happened myself! But he had to say something, so he tried the best he knew how.

“It was as if God Himself were speaking directly to me, saying that I was only seeking to be in the church to get rich: like I was filled with an evil longing for money while pretending to serve God when I’m actually only serving my own selfish desires.”

Blessed was eyeing him suspiciously now and with a growing discomfort in her own heart. “Are you trying to say that if God blesses you with prosperity that you’re an evil person? Is that what you’re saying?” He could tell she wasn’t happy with the direction of the conversation.

“Listen, dear,” he said pleadingly, “I’m only trying to tell you what happened to me this morning. I’m not sure how to even explain it,” the last words were spoken apologetically.

“Continue,” was her less than encouraging response as she picked at the rice on her plate.

“Well, it was the deepest conviction of sin I’d ever experienced. I was weeping, crying out to God to forgive me. I confessed my wickedness of trying to use God to get wealth. It’s an awful thing. I saw myself to be plunging into ruin and destruction. I asked the Lord to save me,” he had told her all.

Suspicion turned to alarm in her heart. *What is the matter with this man? Has he lost his senses?* “So, you are saying that if God blesses you with riches you are a sinful person!” she didn’t wait for a reply.

“Have you gone mad? Everything we have hoped for and prayed for and worked for in this church, you’re now throwing to the wind? I thought something was wrong with you this morning when I got up and found you in the parlor,” it was an accusation.

She was just getting started and left him no opportunity to interrupt. “I suppose that this imaginary conviction of yours sets aside everything you’re practiced and believed up until now? No, Femi, don’t you abandon your hope and your faith. What would Rev. Benson say if he knew about this... this...” she was almost spluttering looking for the right word, “this crazy notion that’s entered your head?”

Stopping short, as if a new thought had just occurred to her, both eyes narrowed as she pressed forward accusingly. “Who put this foolish idea into your head?”

“Uh, no one did. I just read the Word of God and the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart.”

Not to be easily put off once she believed she was on to something, Blessed continued, “Why did you begin to read that particular part of the Bible in the middle of a Sunday service?”

Femi knew where she was driving and knew he couldn’t truthfully evade the inevitable. “Someone in the congregation put a note in my hand asking me to look up those references.”

“And who, might I ask, was that?” her hands were on her hips and the tone stinging, certain that she already knew the answer.

“It was brother John,” Femi said quietly. He knew what would follow.

“I thought so! How many times have I warned you about that cloth-trading ‘Bible brother’? ‘The Bible says this, the Bible says that,’” she ridiculed sarcastically. “Well, I’ve never heard of a cloth-trader who knew more than an anointed Reverend Dr., but you seem to have met one,” her last words were biting.

“Blessed, it’s not what John says that matters, it’s what God says in His Word. God spoke to me through His own Word. John didn’t say one thing to me. It was the Holy Spirit,” Femi was trying desperately to have Blessed understand what he had seen from the Scriptures.

A pair of glaring eyes met his. A determined finality framed her next words. “I am a member of Christ’s Tabernacle of Glory. That is where divine blessing is. That is where the anointed Man of God is whom the Lord is using and speaking through.

“I will not be disobedient to the heavenly vision. If you want to join some cloth-trader tabernacle, be my guest. But don’t expect me to follow you in such deluded madness.”

“But Blessed, no one is saying they’re leaving anything and joining something else. And why are you so angry at brother John?” Femi was pleading with her, more grieved than upset.

For some seconds she stared at him, flushed and agitated by her outburst. Really, she had nothing against brother John and she truly loved her husband. But the love of things and the love of her husband’s position with all of its prospects pulled strongly at her heart. John, actually, John’s Bible, seemed to her to threaten all of that. It was a great sacrifice she was not prepared to make at the moment.

“You heard what I said,” and with that, she noisily gathered up the plates and disappeared into the kitchen.

4

“Hey, Femi!” before he could even see the waving hand through the crisscross of early morning taxis, he knew who it was. No one else called him like that except brother John.

Weaving amidst the maze of momentarily slowed traffic, Femi and John soon clasped hands together with a resounding clap. They were glad to see each other.

“What brings you down this way?” John cheerily inquired.

“Oh, just to drop off some preliminary proofs at the printer’s for the upcoming city-wide night vigil.”

“Yeah, I heard some rumors about that. Big time stuff, eh?”

“I guess so. Big time preparations, anyway,” Femi was slowing in his conversation, growing serious. “Say, John, do you have a minute so we could talk together?”

“Sure, why not? Let’s go to my shop.” It was a short trek to where he traded cloth. John bought a couple of minerals along the way. He popped the lid off of one, setting it before his friend who was straddling one of the benches inside, surrounded by endless bolts of material.

“Thanks for the note on Sunday,” he paused reflectively, staring at the bench top, aimlessly swishing around the Coke in its bottle. John didn’t interrupt. Femi heaved a great sigh and turned his face away slightly from his friend as if ashamed. “The Lord used it, John,” his voice developed a slight note of strain. “I’m a sinful man, brother,” there was definite sorrow in this short, slowly spoken statement.

Inwardly, John voiced heartfelt thanks to God at how marvelously the Lord had used these Scriptures to answer his oft repeated prayers for Femi. He continued, though, silently listening, knowing that more would follow. He had learned that true spirituality is never a hurried matter of force or formula.

He was not mistaken. “My stupid tithe message kept ringing over and over in my ears. It was like torture,” Femi turned and squarely faced his friend. “This whole thing of Prosperity is deception and wickedness, isn’t it?” it was more his own conclusion than actually asking a question and was spoken in earnestness.

John studied Femi's intense and sober face for a moment before quietly replying, "I'm afraid it's one of the greatest deceptions that has come upon the church in our time."

"Cai!" Femi burst out indignantly, his voice trailing in wonderment at the realization. Silence settled for some moments. John sipped at the Coke, waiting patiently.

"Listen, John, I've seen it. I really have. The Lord just exposed the whole thing for the evil that it is. God, forgive me. How many people have I deceived?" it was a sincere question, one that truly disturbed his heart.

An answer wasn't really expected, he was merely declaring a profound realization. "Then Rev. Benson is deceived too, isn't he?" he voiced it aloud and reflected upon the implications of that for a while. It was a big statement to make.

"Look, John, this is serious. I need to know more of what the Word of God says about all this," Femi was, probably for the first time, truly hungering and thirsting after righteousness. It was a blessed condition to be in.

Smiling, John reached for his Bible, and, noticing that Femi didn't have his own, pulled another one down and handed it to him. "Which kind of pastor is this that doesn't even carry a Bible?" John teasingly asked his friend.

Femi started to laugh but caught himself before he did. His smile fading, a holy seriousness came over him. Quietly, and with conviction, he confessed, "Not a very good one, I guess. From now on," he held up the Bible, "this is my constant companion and guide."

John's heart thrilled at the transformation of his friend which he witnessed before his eyes. He only said, "Femi, let's pray."

"Father, we bless You for sending forth the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus seen in Your most excellent Word. Where would we be without it? Lord, we simply ask that you would open our eyes yet more and more that Your Word might guide our feet in Your everlasting path. For Jesus' sake, Amen."

Refreshing, yes, that's the word, refreshing. His prayer was nothing like the acrobatic bravado I'm used to. Thank God for brother John.

"Prosperity is really another gospel. It twists the Scriptures and denies all that real Christianity is."

"Hold on, John. Give me paper. I've got to write this down so I can show it to Blessed. She wasn't exactly happy about I Tim.6, you know," he said that with an unpleasant recollection, at the same time hoping that John might give him some advice about what to do. John understood the unspoken appeal and reminded himself to bring it up before Femi left.

"Jesus said in Lk.16:13-15," both flipped the pages of their Bibles 'till they found the place, 'You cannot serve God and Mammon.'

"The religious leaders scoffed at Jesus because they loved money. Jesus told them that their highly valued money was an abomination in the sight of God. These are the basic issues with the false gospel of Prosperity: Whom will you serve, God or riches? You can't do both, regardless of what the reverends tell us."

"It seems so clear now. Why haven't I seen it before?" Femi was truly puzzled.

"Because Jesus said that 'the deceitfulness of riches choke the word' John simply replied.

"Where did He say that?"

"In Matthew 13," Femi was already turning the pages, "Let's see," he paused, scanning the text 'till he came to v.22, "Here it is," and he read the verse aloud.

Femi let that sink in for a moment, then asked, "I see it now, all right, but what is this Mammon Jesus spoke about? I need more explanation on that one."

"Mammon was the name Jesus gave to the false god of riches. It was like the spirit of wealth personified. All gods govern the lives of their followers, having them perform whatever behavior that will serve their purposes best.

"Wealth does the same. That's why you cannot serve both; the Lord Jesus directs your heart to the things above while Mammon fills you with its evil desires for the things of earth. They're mutually exclusive deities. One is the Way, the Truth, and the Life while the other is spiritual wickedness and deception."

"But why do these preachers always talk about God delighting in the prosperity of His servant?"

“Let’s look at it. I think it’s in Psalms thirty something. Let’s see,” John was glancing through successive verses rapidly, “Here it is, Psalm 35:27, ‘The Lord be magnified, which hath pleasure in the prosperity of His servant,’ at least that’s how the King James Bible puts it. What does yours say?”

Femi found it in the NIV and read, “‘The Lord be exalted, who delights in the well-being of His servant.’ Habah! That’s completely different than what we’ve been told all this time!

“This is not talking about money at all! It’s talking about things being well spiritually in the hearts of God’s people. That’s what the Lord delights in,” Femi was shaking his head in amazement at his discovery from the Word of God.

“That’s it, brother. It’s why we must always obey what the Lord commanded us, to ‘Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.’”

“Where’s that one?” Femi interrupted.

“That’s I Thess.5:21,22. It’s what we find the Bereans doing in Acts 17:11,” the pages were rustling again, “Listen to this, ‘They received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.’”

Femi was making rapid but careful notes while John spoke. He glanced up with a flash of insight and remarked, “Those simple believers judged what even the Apostle Paul said by the Word of God, didn’t they?” John nodded in agreement sensing that his friend had more to say.

“If they did that with Paul, why haven’t I been doing this all along with everything I’ve heard from ministers of God?” it was a revelation to his heart that needed no reply.

“It’s one of the biggest problems in the church, brother. We’ve been putting our confidence in the man of God instead of the Word of God: in the messenger rather than the message,” it was a profound observation for Femi to consider.

“That’s why I’ve been deceived, isn’t it? It’s my own fault because I wanted to be deceived. Instead of obeying the Bible’s commands to be discerning and believe only what the Word of God clearly teaches, I just listened to whatever agreed with my own desires,” Femi soberly reflected aloud. “Cai, cai, cai!” were his only remaining comments.

“Just look at the lives of the true men of God in the Scriptures. What was Paul’s experience? Was he living in prosperity?”

Femi gave him a blank stare in response, “I don’t know, I guess I’ve never really thought about it,” he sounded a little sheepish about his ignorance.

John only smiled encouragingly and said, “Well, let’s find out then. Read I Cor.4:11.”

Pages were turning again ‘till Femi’s finger struck the spot, “I’ve got it. ‘To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.’”

The reading was complete. “What kind of prosperity is this?” Femi exclaimed indignantly, “I suppose the reverends would claim Paul just didn’t have enough faith to ‘possess his possessions,’ huh?” sarcasm fairly dripped from his last query. “I’ve known their secrets now,” he added with disgust.

“Paul’s not the only one. What about all of the faithful men of God through the ages? All of them had a testimony through their faith, but were not prospering in the least. Look at Heb.11:37-39. Listen to this,” John began reading while Femi jotted down the references.

“‘They went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes of the ground. And all these, obtained a testimony through their faith.’”

Femi was shaking his head in amazement once again.

“The Lord never promises prosperity to people if they have ‘faith,’” John concluded, “in fact, he warns us against prosperity in all of its forms. Jesus put it this way, ‘Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed, for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.’ That’s Lk.12:15,” he added before he could ask.

“Huh, greed and possessions, coveting and prosperity, they all kind of go together, don’t they?” Femi observed.

“In fact, coveting is called idolatry twice in the New Testament, in Col.3:5 and Eph.5:5. It’s serving Mammon instead of God.”

“Then it’s really another religion and not Christianity at all,” Femi mused slowly. It was a staggering assessment, almost too big to grasp.

“Listen, brother, it’s an ancient one. Jesus contended with money changers who were making the house of God into a place of merchandise. Paul said many were peddling the Word of God for profit. That’s in 2 Cor.2:17,” he added as he watched Femi busily scribbling down notes.

“And Peter tells us that these false teachers will entice many to follow their shameful ways and bring the way of truth into disrepute. This is how they do it, ‘in their greed, they will make merchandise of you with false words.’ Uh... that one is found in 2 Pet.2:2,3.”

“We’ve gone far, brother, really far. Habah! It’s almost too much to take in,” Femi glanced at his watch and added, “Hey, I need to be going. Thanks a lot, John; this has really been a blessing.” As an afterthought he ventured, “How do you know all of those verses, anyway?”

John just smiled as he held up his Bible, “Oh... this has been my constant companion for some time now.” Femi grinned back knowingly.

After prayer, as Femi rose to go, John had not forgotten about Blessed. “You were saying about Blessed...” A look of remembrance lightened Femi’s eyes with a hopeful expectation, “Let me ask you this, brother, how was it that you came to understand what you do now?”

Femi reflected a moment before responding, “I guess the Lord just opened my eyes through His Word,” he looked at John to see if he agreed.

He only smiled in agreement then concluded, “I know you’re eager for her to see what you have, but be patient small, small. Wait for the Lord to show her these things while you continue to pray. She won’t grasp it in a day.”

It was good advice for which he was grateful. “Thanks, brother. Hey, here comes your first customer. I’ll let you know how things go,” he waved back as he entered the street and headed for the printer’s.



“Um! Something smells good in here,” he greeted Blessed as he entered the parlor.

“Oh, Femi, you’re home!” Blessed called back from the kitchen where stew was on the fire for lunch. She quickly came out bringing water to meet her husband. “How de morning?”

“No problem. I had to go into town for some printing for the night vigil coming up. After lunch I’ll go back to the church office so we can make the final changes before the handbills are printed.”

“Fine,” she said over her shoulder as she headed back to the kitchen, “Continue, I just need to finish up the stew.”

John was correct. Femi was eager. His heart was filled with a light and freedom like he hadn’t known before. He longed for his wife to share in it with him.

“Listen to this, Dear,” Femi had taken his Bible and found Lk.16:13-15. He read out loud the key points of the passage. “No servant can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and money. The Pharisees, who loved money heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.’”

Only silence answered him from the kitchen. Unknown to him, a mighty wrestling had begun in his wife’s heart.

The Word of God had entered her as a sword, piercing deeply and exposing her own thoughts and intents. Stunned, a Maggi cube dropped from her hand onto the floor. Blood was pounding in her ears as she stood still with shortness of breath.

This is the Word of God! It’s true, I can’t deny it. I can’t serve God and riches, I know it. A sense of desperation gripped her. She didn’t want it to be true. She yet loved money, yearning for prosperity, but she knew it was wrong. The Lord had spoken to her heart.

Thus the struggle began, which necessarily must, whenever truth is resisted. Mechanically, she stirred the stew, her mind racing with colliding and conflicting thoughts.

Not knowing exactly what to make of the silence, Femi was hopeful that it was a good sign and went on with his reading from Phil.4:12,13.

“Apostle Paul said this, ‘I know what it is to be in need, and I know how to live in prosperity. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.’”

A clattering spoon was the only sound that met his ears. Conviction from the Holy Spirit had settled upon his wife.

To be in need...being content...hungry...all things through Christ. She was deeply affected, convinced but still unyielding. *Why now? Why not after God prospers us? It's not fair! It's just not fair!* Truth continued to ring in her ears, yet her will continued stiffly against it. She was in a miserable state now, not wishing to abandon her desires.

"It is such a wonderful relief to simply trust the Lord for whatever He is pleased to provide. There's a peaceful gladness in submitting all to Him, a real rest and freedom from striving."

She heard every word and was pricked all the more. She couldn't take anymore at the moment. Finding some strength somewhere, from a troubled breast she managed to haltingly say, "Femi, let's not quarrel. I've heard what you've said, and you heard what I said this morning," the last statement was uttered through thick guilt, knowing that it wasn't right.

Femi's heart sank, little realizing that his words were greatly used by God to influence his wife for her everlasting good. He thought about John's last words to him and regained enough courage to reply, "Okay, Blessed, if that's what you want."

It was and it wasn't. She didn't want to be at odds with her husband and she certainly did not wish to fight God Himself. But she couldn't bear to part with her longing for riches, not now, not yet.

They ate together in silence. Femi finished first and stood up. "Uh, I'm going to the church office now." Blessed only nodded without looking up. With a final glance at his wife, picking at her food without really eating, he headed for the door.

But he stopped short and returned to the parlor. He had almost forgotten his new constant companion. She watched him pick up his Bible and pass outside. There was no rest for her thoughts.

Suddenly an alarming anxiety gripped her.

What if he loses his job over this?

A cloud of misery descended upon her as she sat alone in the cheerless parlor.

5

"Pastor Femi, you're welcome!" Mary greeted him in her bubbly motherly way. She was the church secretary who brooded like a mother hen over all matters entering her domain.

"Good afternoon, Ma'am, how de day?"

"Busy, busy, busy!" she said enthusiastically. Femi knew she wouldn't stop there. Mary loved to talk, but no one seemed to mind her bustling maternal manner.

"Oh, this vigil with all the phone calls and contacting this one, that one, and the other one keeps me going, morning to night." The cluttered array of papers strewn across her desk lent

credibility to her claims. Really, her desk always looked that way. Mary was somewhat absent-minded and not overly efficient either, but, nevertheless, managed to get things done in spite of it.

“Now, I suppose you’ve come to weigh me down with burdens too great for a poor old soul like me to bear,” she clucked good-naturedly. Femi grinned back at her.

“No, nothing like that,” Femi protested, “I just need to drop off some printing proofs for Rev. Benson.”

“Well, in that case, you’re highly welcome!” she chuckled at her own teasing humor. “Go on in, Pastors Emmanuel and Chide are already there. The Reverend himself will soon be around.”

After customary greetings, their conversation turned to the upcoming vigil. “This is going to be a mighty move of the Holy Ghost. It will probably be the greatest single gathering of powerful anointed men of God that this city’s ever seen!” Emmanuel reported with an enthusiasm approaching that of pride.

He was the most ambitious of the junior pastors, always alert and eager for any opportunity that might promote his own advantage. “Rubbing shoulders with some of the city’s big ministers will be good exposure for all of us,” he added, with himself particularly in mind. Such self-promoting ambition didn’t disturb him in the least.

“The stadium should be packed. We’re expecting tens of thousands from everywhere, all anxious for their miracles,” Pastor Chide chipped in his comments, “and willing to bring their offerings to get them!” he added with a tone of obvious relish at the thought.

In times past, Femi would have overlooked, or even enjoyed, the trend of the discussion. Today, however, he bristled with disdain at the casual carnality of his peers.

“God is not interested in mere numbers and certainly is unimpressed with what men think themselves to be,” Femi interjected with a quiet but firm reproof whose sting was felt. “And is getting people’s money why we’re holding this thing?” The question was left hanging like an unsettled cloud in the uncomfortable silence following.

It was Emmanuel who spoke up presently with what he thought would implicate Femi and excuse themselves. “What kind of comment is that coming from such an expert at raising tithes and offerings?” he retorted sarcastically, “What do you have to say about that?”

Shame coursed through him momentarily at the thought of his performance in the worship service. “What I did on Sunday was not pleasing to the Lord. It was nothing more than deceived and deceiving disobedience to God and His Word from which I have sincerely repented,” Femi replied contritely with conviction.

Stunned by his frankness and unexpected confession, Emmanuel and Chide only looked at each other in bewilderment before shifting their eyes to the floor. Neither one wished to face Femi at the present in the tenseness hanging in the Reverend’s private chamber.

Finally, it was Chide who broke the strain of the awkward moments. “What do you mean, Femi, ‘disobedience to God and His Word,’ what are you trying to say?” It was more of a challenge to defend himself than an honest inquiry.

Without hesitation, Femi launched directly into an explanation of what had happened to him as he had read the Scriptures. Amazement mingled with guilt, stirred in their hearts at what they heard coming from his mouth.

“Afternoon, gentlemen,” Benson was back, striding commandingly past them to ascend his position of power behind his desk.

“Good afternoon, Sir. You’re welcome, Sir,” all three had instantly sprung to their feet, almost with military-like posture before their “commander.” The Rev. Dr. noticed the opened Bible in Femi’s hand and sensed an atmosphere of discomfort between them.

“Have your seats.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Having a little discussion are you?”

“Uh, yes, Sir,” Emmanuel quickly broke in, “Pastor Femi was just trying to tell us that taking tithes and offerings is sinful,” Emmanuel took the opportunity to present Femi in the worst possible light. “We were challenging him on these strange ideas when you met us,” he added to present himself in the best possible light.

The General Overseer tilted back pensively, rocking slightly, as his eyes narrowed darkly in a steady gaze at the news. Leaning forward now, with elbows upon the glittering desktop, he simply said, "Well, Pastor, what do you have to say?"

Normally, Femi would have been scattered in his thoughts by the intimidating scene of which he was the center. Somehow, though, a peace that passed all understanding was guarding his heart and mind as he spoke.

"What I was actually explaining, Sir, is that the Word of God warns us about and condemns the love of money. It says so right here," and he proceeded to read I Tim.6:5-11 aloud for the second time that afternoon.

Terror gripped Benson's heart as he forced himself to maintain his outward composure during the reading. It had exposed the secrets of his inner motives, leaving him desperate to extinguish the light which streamed from the divine text.

But, over the years, he had mastered the technique of violating his own conscience in order to justify his longings. Defeat would not be obtained by a single assault such as this, so entrenched was he in his bastion of deceived self-will.

Quickly quenching the Spirit's conviction, he smugly responded, "This is why you're a junior assistant and not yet a Man of God," he let the impact of these words sink in, "The blessing of God through prosperity and the love of money are two different things altogether.

"I don't think you are wishing to call into question the obvious divine principle upon which this ministry has been blessed by heaven, are you, Pastor?" it was spoken accusingly, as a reproof for daring to even say what he had in his presence.

Femi had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being charged with crimes of which he was not guilty. But he was not to be daunted by the thoughts of man by whomsoever they were uttered.

Once a man has seen the light, you cannot convince him that darkness and light are the same again. Femi determined to simply press on, not as before, in compromise and confusion, but now with inner resolve borne of the Spirit of God by His Word.

"I'm only wishing, Sir, to honor the Lord Jesus in obedience to His Word. Jesus Himself said, 'You cannot serve God and wealth.' It was the Pharisees, who loved money that scoffed at this Word from God. The Lord told them that what they were doing was detestable in God's sight."

Femi's quiet and respectful reply was received as if it were a slap in the face to the furious President and Founder. With an abrupt violent jolt which sent his throne bounding into the wall behind him, Benson fairly stormed around the desk positioning himself threateningly before him.

"Listen to me, small boy," he hissed loudly through clenched jaws, "I'm the anointed Man of God in this ministry, you hear! You want to follow the Bible, do you? Well, then, hear what the Lord says, 'Touch not mine anointed and do my prophets no harm!'" his voice had risen significantly and taken on a tone of disdain, "So, you had better pay closer attention to that Bible of yours," he scornfully mocked him, "and never quote that thing to me again," it was a threat, and then added in spite, "as if you had the slightest idea of what it means, anyway."

The discussion, if it could be called that, was over. Emmanuel sat by approvingly at the Rev. Dr.'s reproof of his insolent co-worker. *Who does he think he is, anyway, to dare to question a Man of God? It's just wicked rebellion, and more than that, suicidal to one's own ministry.*

"Now, did you have any reason for being here this afternoon, except to spread your confused and half-baked notions?" Benson was still seething.

Femi knew it was useless to protest or seek to explain any further, so he meekly extended the documents in his hand saying, "Sir, these are the proofs for the handbills that I picked up at the printer's this morning."

Without acknowledgment, he tossed them onto the desktop with a loud smack as they landed. "Anything else?"

"No, Sir."

"Then there's no need for you to interrupt the business of God any further today."

Femi knew what that meant and rose to his feet without a word other than, "Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir." Crossing the room, as he opened the door, there was one parting shot from the Reverend.

“Oh, Femi, I don’t think that you would like it at all if I were to hear from any of the members that you were continuing to sow seeds of discord among the congregation.”

Hand still on the latch, he had paused for his final admonition. With a heavy heart, he nodded and passed into the outer office. Suki was seated there awaiting audience with the President, patiently trying to act interested in Mary’s non-stop banter. She had heard Benson’s last word through the opened doorway.

“Pastor Femi, how are you? How’s the wife and children?” Suki inquired pleasantly.

“Fine, fine,” was his less than enthusiastic reply. He guessed that she must have overheard the departing declaration and hastened to exit that scene, away from the churning distress of the past minutes.

Suki only smiled at him as he made his retreat to the outside, carefully making a mental note of what she had witnessed.

~

“The last of the ten thousand CDs are nearly ready for the vigil, Reverend,” Suki proudly announced after Emmanuel and Chide had left.

“That’s the best news I’ve had all day,” was his only tense comment. Then, as if hearing what she had said for the first time, he blurted out, “Ten thousand? Why so few? We can sell more than that!” He still sounded slightly upset, but controlled himself the best he could, not wishing to offend her in the slightest.

“Settle down, settle down,” she smiled with a tone of ever increasing familiarity which had grown between them. “At ₦ 200 profit per tape, that’s ₦ 2 million of pure profit in one evening,” she coolly added with an enticing glance. It had its effect as he reclined back in his magnificent chair.

Without losing a moment's momentum, she continued, “Besides, if everyone can buy as many CDs as they’d like, who then would need come to Christ’s Tabernacle of Glory to purchase any?”

He paused to reflect on that a moment. It was true, if they had to come here for the tapes, membership would grow, CDs would still sell, and offerings would increase, all at the same time.

It was a clever scheme, dreamed up by Suki herself. She had convinced the Rev. Dr. to purchase top-of-the-line recording equipment for the increasingly popular Suki Singers.

He was reluctant at first, until the details unfolded before his eyes. Then, when the greedy potential was grasped fully, he fairly rushed to comply with the investment. And it was paying off handsomely.

A slowly growing smile creased his face, the former storm having abated for a season. “I’m liking you more and more all the time,” his smooth tongue flattered her with seductive oiliness.

Not to be outdone, Suki leaned forward alluringly, “The feeling is mutual, Benson, Dear,” and she puckered her lips at him invitingly.

He grinned back at her with burning desire, both for her and at the growing success of his ultimate plan.

She returned a teasing smile with growing satisfaction at the undetected progress of her own devices.

6

“Shan-ta-rapusa-medasko. Oooh,shulio-bababa. Tanka rakusko debusho,” the Rev. Dr. Benson’s head shook, rolled, and bobbed with convincing intensity as he led the tens of thousands of expectant night vigil attendees. A cacophony of conflicting shrieks, howls, and groaning of unknown tongues from the throng did battle with each other, competing to be heard over the roaring din. Benson’s own blared above them all through the powerful public address system strategically placed throughout the stadium’s capacity crowd.

Spotlighting, perfectly kept his every stride across the mighty platform in crisp focus. From brilliant globes behind him, shone an impressive assemblage of anointed ministers, seated, Sanhedrin-like, on the stage’s high-table.

Flanked on the right side of the glittering podium was the fifteen-member band ensemble, heavily manned on the rhythm and percussion end. To the left, gorgeously bedecked upon their three tiered mini-stage, were the Suki Singers, and Suki herself, out front, stunningly adorned for the occasion.

“Victory Vigil” was emblazoned across the top of the professionally computer-designed handbills. Their appealing four-color-process splashes of brilliant tones announced a supernatural extravaganza of Deliverance, Signs and Wonders, Healings, and Breakthroughs for Prosperity.

“Your Miracle is Waiting!” promised the circulars. Especially featured were impressive bigger-than-life photos of the Rev. Dr. Benson shouting a prophetic word from God into his mike. The other side portrayed Sister Suki, eyes closed, hands raised heavenward, in an ecstasy of divine aspiration.

Below, it was clearly stated, “Hosted by Christ’s Tabernacle of Glory.” Concluding it all was the highlighted text, “Suki Singers CDs available for purchase.”

They were plastered in every conceivable location throughout the city. One could scarcely turn without encountering their brazen over-confident claims. But they were effective tools as was evidenced by the overwhelming response of the multitudes. Benson was delighted.

“I want you to begin to take dominion. I want us to come against every stronghold of the enemy,” he blared militantly. An instantaneous rumble rose and gathered to deafening proportions from the assembly of spiritual soldiers.

“Tear down the habitations of darkness. I decree, no spirit shall stand against this mighty army of God! Blood of Jesus! Sweep them away in your overflowing flood!

“Funtirala baska. O tanto reshunda mekesko,” Benson’s own “tongues” faded into a series of indistinguishable popping and hissing noises, periodically punctuated by outbursts of “Blood of Jesus!” or “Yes, Lord!”

In utter abandon by now, the perspiring jostling masses ranted and raved repetitively the formulas they had absorbed over time by endless exposure to their Reverend's repeated prayer-points. As if the correct button on some electronic gadget had been pressed, the people sounded forth at full volume what they were programmed to say.

It emboldened them with a sense of courage and supernatural energies beyond their normal capabilities. Whether true or not, they felt as if they had gained a tremendous victory; and that feeling was what mattered more than anything to most of them. Without it, the pathway would not have been cleared for their promised prosperity to come. And that, after all, is why they were there.

"All witches and wizards, every spirit of poverty, you devouring demons of doubt, I bind you! I cast you from your high places to the lowest pits of hell, in Jesus' name!" The Rev. Dr. was rounding up his introductory prayer ritual.

"Amen!" the multitudes interjected.

"I come against, I scatter all your schemes; every evil devise, every weapon fashioned against this program, I pull you down. You are destroyed, in the name of Jesus!" he commanded with almost realistically sounding authority.

"Amen!"

"Thank You, Father!" Benson boomed the benediction.

"Thank You, Lord!" retorted thousands of prayer warriors.

"We know You've heard us, Daddy, for we pray in Jesus' name!"

"Amen!"

"P-R-A-I-S-E THE LORD!!!"

"Hallelujah!" they thundered with the excitement of fans gathered for a Super Eagles match. Actually, it was difficult to discern any difference between the emotionalisms of either.

"The Lord is good!"

"All the time!"

Crashing cymbals and pounding percussion paved the way for the rollicking Praise and Worship which followed. Suki was in the saddle now and riding the mounting wave of enthusiasm with skill. Varied colored spotlights riveted the attention of all upon her every move as they rocked in rhythm to her medley of favorite choruses.

Bluster, noise, and fantastical promises filled the hours between 10 PM and 4 AM with an ever revolving kaleidoscope of brilliantly flashing guest ministers. Each seemed to capitalize on the last in a mounting crest approaching the pinnacle of the evening.

The people believed what they were told. It was the anointed men of God, some of the most noteworthy in the city, who had spoken, and their words must surely come to pass. Who could ever question what God had ordained them to say and do?

It would be unthinkable. To doubt their prophetic word was the same as denying the Lord Himself who, they had come to accept, was speaking through them.

Thus, they hung upon their every word, attentive to even the smallest of details of the techniques presented by each for securing the blessings of heaven. There was really nothing innovative, insightful, or even useful in what they spoke. But it was not so much what they said that was significant to them, it was the fact that a Man of God had given a divine formula.

Steps to Success, Formulas of Faith, Laws of Liberation, and Principles of Prosperity. They were really all one and the same, merely reshuffled, rephrased, and re-packaged with each ministry's distinctive label.

Like so many competing bath soaps, clamoring for the buyers' selection, they presented their own with all the appeal of carefully chosen appearances, fragrances, and price tags. But they were really nothing more, nothing different, than mere soap. The basic ingredients remained unchanged.

And so it was this evening. Each minister made the most of his opportunity to sell his own brand of spiritual cure-all, subtly, of course. No one was brazen and foolish enough to openly advertise his own ministry. It would not be tolerated.

But, afterwards, none of these reverends would object if members from another ministry were siphoned off into their own. None, that is, except the reverend whose sheep had been

“stolen.” He would not be happy. But doing unto others as you would have them do unto you was not their concern.

As the program progressed, a virtual explosion of spiritual fireworks erupted with its dazzling array across the night’s sky. Overly exaggerated exploits followed, one upon the other, with increasing acrobatic agility, each more highly acclaimed than the former.

Hot, and hotter still, Holy Ghost fire was commanded to fall, and fall again. Satan, if we would believe the reverend gentlemen, was so thoroughly bound, destroyed, and banished that he had no hope of ever troubling anyone again, even on the day of Armageddon.

Thirst for displays of raw power coursed through the crowd, intoxicating them, inflaming their breasts with its heat. Like as if in the final minutes of a closely contested football match, the audience was on its feet, thrilling at the anticipated victory soon to be realized.

Benson took command. They were ready and the time had come. The way had been prepared through the pre-monitored testimonies of blessings received through correctly applying the divine laws of Prosperity.

Several of these had been skillfully interwoven at strategic points throughout the program. Their seed-faith offerings had already been collected by his carefully instructed squadron of ushers. The stage was set for the miraculous, and he was not about to disappoint them.

“A powerful anointing of God has come upon me,” he announced with dramatic intensity with his right arm raised in a gesture of blessings flowing as if from his fingertips. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to set the captives free!” was his shameless distortion of the biblical text to promote his own agenda.

“I have seen the Holy Ghost descending as a dove upon this very platform. The ministering angels of light have gathered themselves together and are present at this very moment awaiting their God-given assignments,” the proclamation was made as if heaven was at his beck and call.

“Thus says the Lord God,” it was the moment they had been longing for. Benson paused, hands raised, eyes shut as if in deep meditation, “There is a woman to my left in the back section who has been suffering from waist pains. I tell you by the authority that’s in me, ‘Rise and be healed, in Jesus’ name!’”

Necks were craning to see the miraculous wonder manifest before their very eyes. True to his word, a woman slowly emerged from the crowd repeatedly pressing her hands around her middle with an astonished look of surprise. “I..I...I’m healed!” she finally stammered, “Thank God! I’m healed!”

The crowd went wild. “Ushers, let this sister come forward for prayer,” boomed Benson’s authoritative command over the cheering commotion filling the stadium. As she was escorted to center stage, smiling and waving to her enthusiastic admirers in passing, the Rev. Dr. continued.

“We want to do deliverance for all who are oppressed by the devil this night. I decree, ‘Be thou loosed! Be thou loosed, in the name of Jesus!’ Ushers, bring them forward and our fellow anointed ministers of God will meet them here and cast out every foul spirit of bondage.

The reverends on the high-table made their way to the front as multitudes pressed the aisles seeking deliverance. “Pray! O ye warriors of the Lord, pray! Begin to confess their liberty, join in the battle, Pray! Pray! Pray!” dictated the Reverend Benson like an army chief of staff.

Pandemonium broke loose from the charged militia congregated on the stadium’s battle field. The promised victory of the vigil was being realized.

Pastor Femi watched the proceedings from his front row seat where all of Benson’s junior pastors were seated. He was puzzled.

I thought that Satan and the demons had already been bound and cast out before now by all the anointed Men of God. Why are there still evil spirits here at the end of the program?

He had no answer for that, however. But it made him observe the deliverance session from a different standpoint than he had done previously.

“Come out! Come out! Come out!” one of the reverends repeatedly shouted as he whirled in wide circles with hands on the head of the poor creature he was attempting to deliver.

“I shake you from your stronghold, thou foul fiend of fornication,” another minister had grabbed a woman by the shoulders and was rattling the teeth in her head with his violent tossing her about.

A third, seemingly without ever taking a breath, shot out the phrase, machine-gun like in rapid succession, “Blood of Jesus! Blood of Jesus! Blood of Jesus...” It didn’t appear to Femi that anything in particular was being accomplished by this for the person who had come for deliverance. The “sufferer” continued to moan and roll his head from side to side with no apparent relief.

A recently ordained Pentecostal Bishop, joining the occasion from his ministry-base in Lagos, was sought after by many for the reputation he had gained in the spiritual warfare realm. His was a fascinating routine.

With the person’s eyes closed tightly and arms raised high over their heads, the Bishop doled out his recipe time after time. The results were remarkably the same on each participant.

“Contra masheekika shunta bobundala. Jesu orabindala tanto debundah,” it was identical with each one. Then, as if a mighty surge of spiritual power was being transmitted from on high, his hands would jerk upon the head of the delivered, sending him falling backwards to the floor, “slain in the Spirit.”

Benson found himself elevated on his seeming island of a pulpit, surrounded by a virtual sea of slain victims of spiritual deliverance who lay across the platform at his feet.

It was a convincing display for the assembled multitudes, but not so for Pastor Femi. He couldn’t understand why, if the spirits had already been cast out, how they could still be here. Or, if they were not cast out previously, why were they not? If the first round of prayers was ineffective, why would this one prove to be any more successful?

From his vantage point in the first row, it seemed to be more acrobatics than anything else. Still, the proceedings went on uninterrupted despite his uncertainties about the whole affair.

“Jehovah-Rapha, the Lord that healeth thee, manifest Thy glory! Come! Heal Thy people! The Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot deliver.

“The anointing is flowing in the stream of God. Come and drink. Come and bathe. Come and be swept along in its mighty current of blessing,” Benson was imploring the sick, the lame, the blind, and the barren to come forward to the altar of deliverance.

Multitudes rushed forward in the hopes of laying their hand upon the anointed spot that blessing might be transferred to them thereby. Some would have the great privilege of actually having an anointed Man of God lay hands on them.

“Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever! He who healed the multitudes by the Sea of Galilee is alive and present with us here this very night. You can receive, if only you believe. The Bible says, ‘Be it done unto thee according to thy faith,’” Benson misapplied one of his favorite texts.

He never omitted to do so. It was the insurance that, no matter what happened, he could not be blamed. If a person was not healed, it only showed that the individual had no faith, not him.

It was why he could promise the preposterous and no one ever questioned his claims. The very fact of questioning only proved that one was faithless. Thus, healed or not, no spot could ever stick to the Man of God.

And thus they came, fervently trying to banish all doubt and generate within themselves that faith to receive what God was ready to dispense, if they only met the qualifications. Positive confession was the vehicle they rode which promised to carry them through to their destination of blessing.

“I am healed! I am healed! I am healed!” could be heard from hundreds of lips: not because they actually were, but because, if they did not confess it, they certainly never would be. It was a type of mental gymnastics: a Pentecostal form of psychological self-hypnosis.

To the remainder of the throng yet in the stadium it appeared that miracles were being distributed on a wholesale basis, free for the taking. The reverends, in the height of their glory, were visibly prominent, rushing about from one to another as if they were the vessels from which the blessings flowed.

Barren received the power to conceive. Headaches fled before the anointing. Barriers to breakthrough were banished. Walking sticks were thrown aside with exultant shouts of victory.

For more than a half an hour the scene repeated itself as seekers, one after the other, eagerly pressed forward chanting their incantations of positively confessed desires. Femi watched them come and go: shouting, jubilating, as they became caught up in the frenzy of it all.

To his right he noticed a withered and obviously malnourished elderly woman. Her left arm was twisted and deformed, probably that way from birth. The leathery wrinkles of her face were what riveted his attention.

Earnest tears coursed down her cheeks as her lips trembled successively, "O God, have mercy on me. I do love You, Lord. Please look upon me in Your pity. Have mercy on me, O God. Heal me, I beg. I believe You, I believe You, I do believe, help me in my unbelief."

Femi's heart was smitten with compassion and conviction, longing to do something for this helpless soul. But he could do nothing. The reverends did nothing for her. The Rev. Dr. Benson ignored her altogether. And so, after some time, she returned to her place in the bleakness of a sorrow which she attributed to her own lack of faith.

Burned indelibly into his memory was the sight of that face, the disfigured arm, and her immortal words of true faith which went unheeded both by man and God. He watched her slowly fade into the crowd. He never saw her again.

"I decree by the anointing that is upon me, every blessing you received will be permanent, in Jesus' name!" Benson had decided to round up the night's session as the hour of 4:00 AM was drawing near.

"Amen!"

"Place your right hand upon your head and stretch forth your left and begin to self-prophecy, 'I am blessed! I am healed! I will prosper! I will be the head and not the tail! I shall never lack!' in Jesus' name," it was Benson's way of drawing things to a close.

The stadium erupted with the thousands of self-appointed prophets all decreeing their own destinies. Femi had started to elevate his left hand when a vivid vision of the gnarled old lady flashed into his mind's eye. *Which kind of left hand will she stretch forth?*

His own dropped limply to his side. He could not bear to participate in such a charade after what he had witnessed. He listened to the multiplied prophets, all prophesying for self and not one of them blessing his neighbor. Femi lowered his own head and offered a silent prayer that God might hear the heart cry of that old ma.

Benson had turned the mike over to the father of the day, the visiting Bishop from Lagos, for the concluding prayer before the attendees would be dismissed with God's blessing.

They were jubilant as they shuffled slowly out the exit gates where enterprising transport drivers awaited passengers to convey those willing to pay their increased rates to their various destinations. Many lingered to drink in the latest release of the Suki Singers which continued to loudly beckon buyers to the CD tables where business was booming.

Many others plodded along, weighed down with the discouragement born of a seemingly deficient faith. Confess as they may, they nevertheless went home with empty hands despite the reverends' promises and regardless of how many times they decreed blessings which never came.

Femi was among the latter group. Unanswered questions plagued his mind. Particularly troublesome to him was his encounter with the old ma. *What would become of her? Why had the Lord ignored her?* He didn't know.

~

"God has spoken to me by prophetic revelation regarding our future," Benson faced Suki in his private office. Immediately after handing over the mike to the visiting Bishop, he and Suki had slipped away, unnoticed, backstage and entered his awaiting Mercedes. No one had seen her, seated in the back, obscured by tinted glass, as he pulled away from the stadium grounds.

It was now 4:30 AM and they were alone in the blackness, save for the glow from one small florescent lantern in the corner. He had studiously engineered this moment as part of his carefully contrived scheme.

Stripped of all pretenses, only three things motivated the man: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. It is why he wanted Suki. She would fulfill all three of the longings of his heart.

Burning passion for her ravishing beauty raged like a wildfire within him which, he thought, could only be quenched by indulging his desires. Second, was the lust of his eyes for gain and an

increasing source of vast treasures. He saw that her shrewdness and talented popularity would provide much wealth for him.

Finally, pride crowned it all. He would be the envy of every man and every minister. She would make him look exceedingly fine in the eyes of the world.

And so, a prophesy was hatched, like that of a viper's egg, in his corrupted mind. So inflated was he with delusions of his own grandeur, he actually believed that she would be seriously impressed with the divine weight of his pretense of prophesy.

"Thus says the Lord God, not many days from now, I shall join you in holy matrimony; and you, Benson, and you, Suki, will serve Me together as husband and wife. This shall be for My everlasting glory and the good of My people to whom I will send you with anointing and blessings uncountable.

"As I have decreed, so shall it be. For nothing shall be impossible with God," Benson recited his prophesy as if he had received it fresh from the portals of heaven.

Suki drew closer to him, gazing with wonderment into his eyes, "But, how can these things be since you are a married man?"

Benson was ready for the question. "What is impossible with man, is possible with God. His word cannot fail, for He does all things well. Do not fear; He will make the way plain in His good time."

She seemed satisfied with this as she slipped her arms around his neck, "May the Lord's will be done," she breathed softly before she pressed her lips to his.

Benson was not a man of the Word of God. He never studied the Scriptures and actually knew little of their content. The Bible, for him, was an accessory, a prop for his weekly religious pageant. It remained closed at the pulpit as he marched about spouting scriptural sounding jargon which lent a degree of credibility to his religious act.

Had he known the Scriptures, he would have fled this wanton woman. He would have known the guidance, protection, and conviction that the Word of God brings to a soul as is promised in Proverbs 6:20-22. This Word would have entered his heart and preserved him from the soon awaiting disaster.

"For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light: and reproofs for discipline are the way of life, to keep you from the immoral woman, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress."

But this had not entered his heart, only lust had, and a lust which was to be the snare of his soul.

Suki's eyes captivated him, drawing him to abandon the cautions of decency and restraint. His defiled will was no match for the allurements of her beauty, the touch of her body next to his.

He could have been saved if he loved the truth. But he did not. He never recalled even reading Proverbs 6:23. Had he done so, he would have been warned against the very evil he was plunging into. "Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes."

Captivated, however, accurately described him as they embraced in secret. She was following the long established pattern set by wayward women outlined in Proverbs 7:13,18. "She took hold of him and kissed him and with a brazen face she said: Come, let us drink our fill of love until morning; Let us delight ourselves with caresses."

Whatever reluctance he retained was rapidly eroding before the onslaught of passion rushing as a flood in his bosom. He began to welcome her increasing advances according as it is written in Proverbs 7:21, "With her many persuasions she entices him; with her flattering lips she seduces him."

Suki had slowly pulled away from him, never shifting her seductive gaze from his eyes. In a few tantalizing moments she had lain upon his sofa, her inviting bare skin beckoning him to join her, "Behold, your handmaiden, be it done to me according to your word."

"Suddenly he follows her as an ox goes to the slaughter" - Proverbs 7:22, never realizing how literally the words of the Scriptures would be fulfilled in his own case. "The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; whoever does so destroys himself. Blows and disgrace are his lot, and his shame will never be wiped away" - Proverbs 6:32,33.

Thinking that she had succumbed to his delusion and that his own ends were gained, he rushed headlong into the pit which he had dug for himself.

Suki's own plans were proceeding like clockwork.

7

Streaming sunlight bathed the still slumbering couple in its late morning heat, warming them uncomfortably. “Ugh,” he groaned groggily, “what time is it anyway?” It took some moments for his blurry vision to focus. “After 11:00, Na-wao,” Femi rolled over to tell his wife who could have wished he hadn’t bothered to inform her.

“It was a long night after an exhausting week,” sighed the still weary pastor. Blessed had just begun to adjust to her awakened state and the reason they had slept so late that morning.

“Oh, that’s right, the night vigil,” she blinked as if that might help to clear the fog whirling in her still sluggish brain. “It was really a mighty success, the Lord really moved didn’t He?”

Femi only gazed at her with a dull unimpressed stare, but made no reply.

“I mean, you could just feel God’s presence with the thousands of Spirit-filled worshippers,” Blessed continued somewhat apologetically, sensing that her husband didn’t share her enthusiasm. “And the miracles, there were how many testimonies of healing! It was wonderful!” She paused as if her last exclamation had told it all.

After studying the cracks in the concrete floor for some moments, he quietly asked, “Did you see the old ma who came to the altar for prayer?”

“Why, I, uh, saw different ones; there were many who came out, yes, there were many, weren’t there?” Blessed responded nervously as she observed the strange solemnness of her husband.

Without particularly noticing her answer, he began to relate his encounter as if fetching the memory from a far place. “She was the one with the withered left hand, older and thin, not fed properly, in the stained T-shirt and worn-out wrapper: shoeless,” his voice had a distant hollow tone to it as he recalled her haunting image.

She shifted uneasily, not knowing what to make of her husband’s comments. “No, I don’t remember seeing her,” was the only hesitating thing she could think of to say.

He was studying the cracks again, almost oblivious to his wife’s presence. Then, as if uttering a profound reality, he sighed, “She wasn’t healed.”

What is he trying to tell me and why is he so disturbed by this one old woman? Probably there were many people who weren’t healed.

Then it occurred to her what the reason was. “Well, I guess she just didn’t have faith, that’s all,” was her relieved conclusion which, she thought, would dismiss the matter and move the conversation on past this bumpy juncture.

“She had faith,” Femi stated matter-of-factly, “You should have heard her prayer,” then, as an afterthought, he added, “She had more faith than the reverends who were praying for her, but she wasn’t healed.”

Blessed’s mouth dropped open, both in amazement and protest, but she found no adequate words to voice her inner objections. So, she merely stared at him with the growing tenseness which is born of confusion’s turmoil.

Actually, she was quite disturbed. There was a mounting misalignment between what she had been told by her church and what she was starting to see in the Scriptures themselves. She was realizing that what the reverends promised and what the people received were two different things altogether.

No one is comfortable in an earthquake. The very ground, once firm and immovable, begins to heave and roll uncertainly, sending chills of fear into even the sturdiest of men.

It was what was happening in Blessed’s soul. The very foundations she had stood upon for long were beginning to shift from underneath her, and she didn’t like the feeling at all.

“Do you remember when we were told to stretch out our left hands and self-prophecy?” He glanced up from his contemplation of the floor in time to see her nod. “I couldn’t do it. I just kept seeing in my mind her own useless arm all twisted and deformed. The thought wouldn’t leave

me and I asked myself over and over, ‘How could she ever stretch hers out?’ What must she have been feeling?” The question was left hanging.

“Sorry, Femi, I’m sorry,” Blessed finally managed to utter the words in barely above a whisper.

There was little else that could be said.



Another Sunday.

“Offering time!”

“Blessing time!”

“Blessing time!”

“Offering time!”

Femi was again expected to perform his routine role of reminding the congregation to give, and give very well. Today, however, would be different. Something new had entered Femi’s heart; a love for the suffering and needy had replaced the love of money which formerly had reigned there.

“Our Lord Jesus said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” No one was particularly listening to this oft quoted verse.

They had heard it many times from the ministers as a ploy to get them to give more. And they expected that they knew what was coming next. But what was to follow, though, made them sit up with keen interest and surprise.

“The reason for our giving is not so that we will financially gain in return; it is for the purpose of helping those in need,” Femi had their attention now, Benson included.

What in the world is he doing?! The Reverend was fairly bristling with alarm at the negative impact he sensed this would have on the morning’s offering.

“The apostles in Jerusalem asked Paul to remember the poor. Gal.2:10 tells us that this was the very thing Paul was eager to do. In our giving, we should be eager to be a blessing to the less fortunate and not for our own advantage.

“Prov.22:16 says, ‘He who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and he who gives gifts to the rich - both come to poverty.’” This last passage struck a responsive chord in the hearts of many who nodded and mumbled their agreement in low tones. Light, once seen, cannot be confused with darkness again.

It also had entered the heart of Blessed as a whirlwind, scattering what she had neatly arranged in her mind, sending her thoughts in a flurry of disorder. *The Scriptures are plain, but what of my prosperity? If I give it up, I won’t prosper, but if I pursue it, this verse says I’ll come to poverty.*

Oh, why is Femi doing this? Why doesn’t he just leave well enough alone? I’m so embarrassed. People are looking at me. Dr. Benson isn’t happy at all. What if Femi loses his job?! Oh, my God, what if he loses his job!!

She was right. The G.O. wasn’t happy at all. The sword of the Spirit had entered his own soul and judged the thoughts and intents of his heart encountered there. Benson was terrified, panicked, and furious all at the same time.

He was terrified because his puny god of Mammon was powerless against the Word of God’s two-edged sword. Racing in his heart was the panic of losing Mammon’s reward through the morning offering. And fury raised his blood to the boiling point that his underling pastor would dare defy him and his god within their own sanctuary. He knew he must act quickly.

“Eph.4:28 tells us that what we have is to be shared with the one who has need, not for our own personal gain. As Christians, we are to live and to give for others, not for self. If we turn to...”

“P-R-A-I-S-E the Lord!” Benson had taken the mike from Femi in mid-stream, cutting off any further damaging “blasphemies.” In command now behind his pulpit, the Rev. Dr. said, “Thank you, Pastor Femi, you may be seated.” Then, turning to the congregation, he launched into his recovery plan.

“It is very true that we do not give for selfish reasons. Our giving is to the glory of God! Amen?” he was desperately trying to recapture the moment and salvage the impending disastrous effect upon the upcoming offering.

“Amen!” came the weak half-convinced reply from many of the members. Many, however, said nothing.

“We know that God is glorified when we abound, as the Scriptures say, ‘The Lord takes delight in the prosperity of His servant.’ He’s delighted when we prosper and so He’s delighted when we give; for in giving is the sure way to prosperity,” his logic was faulty and his quotations were distorted and misleading, but he blundered and thundered ahead nonetheless: hoping that his bluster and self-imposed authority would compensate for his spiritual deficiencies.

“Who was blessed, the man who kept his talent, or the man who gave all as an offering to God? I tell you, he who gave all five was he who gained five more,” the President and Founder was a master at twisting the Scriptures off-head.

“It is in giving that we are blessed which will guarantee our hearing, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’ at the end of the day. So, as we give, let us not be selfish but self-sacrificing to the glory of God.”

He had done what he could to make the best of a bad situation. Almost imperceptibly, he signaled to the watching Suki to lend her aid in reviving what remained in the congregation’s confidence and enthusiasm.

She was good at it. People are moved more by emotion and bodily desires than by appeals to reason. And her performance aroused their flagging feelings and longings that Femi’s words had threatened to squelch.

Her songs were extended longer than usual before the head usher was given the cue to swing into action. It was needful to overwhelm their reluctance to contribute and to drown out Femi’s damaging words. When a sense of glad abandon was evident once again, the ushers began their row by row ritual of choreographing the seeming now willing offerors.

The results were slightly disappointing, but only slightly so. Much money was still gathered into the Tabernacle’s storehouse. It would have made most men happy, but not the Rev. Dr. Benson. A brooding melancholy had descended upon him. The reality was that his own assistant pastor was no longer under his control.

~

“We bless the Lord for your words on giving this morning, Pastor Femi,” Pastor Peter greeted his co-worker after the morning service, glancing around to make sure that no one overheard him. Peter was Mary, the secretary’s, husband, a timid and compliant man, as he must necessarily be, married to the kind of woman he was. But he was sincere enough, being genuine and simple in his faith, though not a prominent noise-making type.

“Thank God, Sir,” Femi replied to the past middle-aged fellow pastor.

“We need more genuine exhortations from the Word of God. It helps us to keep things in proper perspective, doesn’t it?” his gentle consistent regularity gave him a soothing appeal and an attractiveness which made him likable to nearly all.

“Yes, Sir. It certainly does, Sir. I’m grateful, Sir, very grateful.” Their eyes met in an understanding way and something like mutual respect passed between them as their hands gripped each other’s warmly before departing.

Lord, I bless you for this humble brother and the encouragement he has brought to my heart. May he not lose his reward in Your coming kingdom. These were Femi’s peaceful thoughts and prayer as he boarded the transport bus for home that afternoon.

~

“Trouble in the kingdom, dear?” Suki had joined Benson in his private chamber following the service. Not even her teasing manner brightened his moodiness.

“There’s trouble all right, big trouble,” his glance shifted to the left side of the desktop with a sullen disturbed expression. The jaw muscles of his temples flexed with the tenseness of repeated clenching of teeth.

“Then why don’t you do something about it?” her tone was a mild challenge mixed with a subtle mockery.

His pride was provoked as she knew it would be. “And what exactly do you suggest I do, sister Suki?” was his offended reply in a way which suggested that there was nothing else to be done than what he was doing.

“Buy me a car, of course. I have it coming to me, you know,” Suki coolly replied with unruffled boldness.

“Oh, that’s just great, Suki, a brilliant solution,” Benson blurted out sarcastically, “Femi sabotages the offerings and now you want me to spend on you what I haven’t even received. Any more helpful suggestions?” he finished with frustration.

“We planted a seed of faith, and its time I saw the harvest,” was the steady and studied reply which bordered on command.

He nearly glared at her for the daring demand, while his calculating mind raced trying to discern which way to proceed. *Is this blackmail? Is she using our adultery to try and manipulate and threaten me? She doesn’t seem to fear me like others do.*

What if she talks? She could ruin my whole ministry. I don’t know if I can trust her, but I don’t have any other choice. Before he could organize his scattered mind, Suki spoke again.

“Hasn’t Femi been spouting off to you and the other pastors that prosperity isn’t biblical?” she asked, obviously in control of the conversation at this point.

How does she know about that? “Yeah, but what of it? What’s that got to do with a car?”

Ignoring his question, like a persistent prosecutor, she pressed her next point home. “And didn’t he tell the congregation that the idea of giving so that they might gain from it wasn’t according to God?”

“Of course he did. We were all there this morning,” he was, with difficulty, maintaining his composure during the interrogation.

“And haven’t you promised for long that there would be breakthroughs and prosperity for planting seeds of faith?” She was in charge and driving at something that he hadn’t discerned as of yet which left him irritated and humiliated, as well as suspicious.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, but I don’t see...” Suki cut him off.

“And didn’t I plant a ₦ 250,000 seed of faith some time ago?” and without waiting for the obvious answer, she landed her final conclusion, “Then I want to harvest a car.”

“Look, Suki, don’t push me. I’m in no mood to have you telling me what to do,” Benson sulkily warned her with a touch of anger.

Suki smiled with satisfaction. She had him where she wanted him: in her hand, fearing to say no to her, and ignorant of her schemes. And her smiling at him made him feel like a schoolboy who hadn’t learned his lessons well.

Suddenly she laughed out loud, “Don’t you see it yet? Listen, what better evidence could there be to prove that seed-faith giving is from God than me driving to church in my new car?” She was pleased with the impact this made upon him. “Femi is trying to tell everybody otherwise and I’ll simply be living proof that what he’s saying isn’t true,” she rounded up with a note of triumph.

Benson’s worried and agitated expression relaxed significantly only to be replaced with one of caution. “Won’t they know that it’s only a set-up if I buy a car for you? That would have just the opposite effect. Everybody will think it’s just another 419 scam,” he replied as if he had discovered the serious flaw in her proposal.

She only smiled again, “That’s why it will be anonymous anointed men of God from the Victory Vigil that will pay for the car.”

He looked puzzled still and the cloud of anger could be seen mounting on the horizon. “And just who might that be?” he asked displaying his ignorance once again.

“It’s you, silly. You put up some money, go to those other big men, and collect the balance from them. You know, ‘God has decreed a thing which must surely come to pass.’ You’re good at that kind of thing, I believe,” she added with a mischievous arch of her eyebrow.

Benson didn't enjoy taking the place of the tail and not the head or of being out maneuvered by anyone, especially Suki. Yet there was a fascinating attraction to her ingenuity and an overpowering allurement to her person, not to mention her body, which had blinded him from the moment he had set eyes upon her.

Self-restraint had long since left him, so completely had his own corrupt desires consumed him. He could not resist. There were really no other options open to him at this point but to go along with her and follow his own defiled impulses.

In his warbled thinking, the plan itself seemed like it would work. It ought to give the impression that "faith" giving would bring eventual prosperity.

I have to do something to rectify the damage done by Femi's influence. That, at least, seemed clear enough to him. *Besides, I may be able to convince enough of the other reverends so that my own portion will be minimal or eliminated altogether.* He consoled himself with this last consideration.

But the manner in which Suki had spoken, or rather, demanded from him, left him extremely unsettled. He knew that he was in a very vulnerable position. *If she talks to anyone about our secrets...*

It is said that there is no honor among thieves. This is true, but there is even less among adulterers. Someone who is willing to violate the most sacred vow of life to gratify a moment's lust, can never be trusted in anything.

An adulterer regards no one, spouse or consort alike, but only the indulging of his own passion. No trust exists between the treacherous two. It could never be; for adulterers are lying coveting thieves ruled only by their own wicked interests. And this is what both of them alike were.

Skillfully she used her body, fame, and promises of increased riches to allure him for her own ends. They are very effective tools. In fact, none better, for none others exist, to gain what one wants in this world. Truthfully, it is all that is actually contained therein (I Jn.2:15-17).

"I've heard you," he finally said, "I think there are possibilities with your idea, with some modifications, of course," it was a bluff in order to make it appear that he was still in control. But he really had no better plan. "So, let me work on it and I'll let you know," he wanted her to feel like he was calling the shots again and not at her mercy.

"Make it a new Mercedes," she interjected as if completely ignoring his supposed command of the situation.

The last statement stung his pride like a scorpion while re-kindling the low burning coals of irritation which still smoldered within him. Before they could burst into flames, though, Suki had slipped into his lap and was whispering in his ear with affectionate smoothness, "You wouldn't want anything less for the future Mrs. Benson, would you?"

Very effectively, this quenched the rising anger and fanned into life a second stronger flame which consumed all else in its path. Quickly his former concerns and cautions faded as he focused his aroused energies upon the immediate satisfaction of the desire before him.

He was really a very foolish man, and she, a very cunning woman.

~

"Hey, preacher," it had to be John. Femi grinned involuntarily to himself. He had really been wanting to see John since the vigil and discuss the troubling things he had observed that night.

"Well done-O. How now? Longest time!" Femi greeted him warmly, even affectionately. They weren't merely friends, they shared genuine fellowship together.

"Fine, fine! What of the wife and children?"

"No problem, they are all fine."

"Too bad you didn't have chance to finish your sermon last Sunday. It was sounding good until you were rudely interrupted," John half-teasingly remarked.

"Yeah, I was just getting warmed up, when, Pyam!, the whole thing was just scattered!" Femi laughed good-naturedly. It really hadn't bothered him like he thought it might have. There was a peace and gladness in speaking the truth that he hadn't known previously which left him composed and joyous even in the midst of opposition.

John was heading to the shop, "Want to come along?"

"Sure, why not?" so the two fell into step together, happily chatting about family, business, and local news as they jostled about the busy streets.

Soon the familiar benches were pulled up inside the cloth shop and Femi launched straight into the perplexities bothering his heart.

"Look, John, you were at the vigil, eh, you saw what was happening. I mean, well, some people were healed, I think, but others weren't. I think you understand me? Like, there was this old ma with a deformed arm who came out, but she wasn't healed. I guess I just don't understand why.

"But I know she had faith. She loves the Lord, I know she does, I heard her prayers. Really, I'm kind of confused about the whole thing.

"I mean, if God wants everyone healed, and the anointed men of God were there, and the woman had faith, then what happened? Why wasn't she healed?" his words poured forth like the cascade of a waterfall during rainy season.

"Hold on, brother, hold on! One thing at a time," John laughed at his friend's zeal. "Let's take a look at several things which, I hope, will help to clear things up. First of all, why do people get sick? Is it true that all illness is either from evil spirits or from our own lack of faith? Is that true?"

"Well, I suppose so, I mean, I think so, isn't it?" Femi inquired hesitantly. It's what he had always been told, but he'd never really stopped to think about it much and certainly had never searched the Scriptures to see if it was so.

John smiled at him, "There's only one way to find out, brother. Oh good, I see that you brought your companion along," he quipped, glancing at Femi's Bible.

Femi grinned back at him, "Well, it won't do us any good lying there closed, will it? Continue!" was his eager reply with pen in hand.

"The Word of God presents four causes for sickness, each with its own remedy. Let's look at each one. The first is illness caused by purely natural means.

"Look at Prov.25:16. If you eat too much honey, you're going to vomit. That's no evil spirit at work, it's simply a natural consequence of something that has entered your body."

"Okay, I can see that. Natural causes have natural cures, kind of like mosquito bites that cause malaria. It doesn't make any sense or do any good to cast out a demon of fever when you really need to take some Chloroquine or something."

"Exactly, now the second cause is the will of God. It may be God's will that a person be sick, even for many years. Turn to John 9:1-3. This man was blind, even from birth, but it wasn't because either he or his parents had sinned. It was clearly the will of God for him to be in that condition."

"Huh, it's true. If some reverend wanted to cast out the spirit that was causing his blindness, he would be casting out God Himself! What kind of "deliverance" is that?" Femi was beginning to see the folly of ascribing all sickness to the work of spirits or one's own sin or lack of faith.

But he still needed to ask, "But surely there are some diseases caused by evil spirits, aren't there?"

"That's the third reason for some sicknesses. We find that taught in Lk.13:11 where a spirit caused a woman to be bent over for eighteen years. No chemist could cure that one!"

"It's true. There are some diseases, as you've said, which only the Lord Jesus can heal because they have no natural cause and certainly aren't God's will," Femi was catching on and becoming settled somewhat in his mind with the explanation. "I'm going to guess, the fourth reason is lack of faith or sin or something like that. Am I right?"

"Well done. The final reason that sickness may exist is because of personal sin. And that's totally different from natural causes, the will of God, or the influence of evil spirits. We see an example of this type in the man who had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus healed him He told the man to 'sin no more that nothing worse may happen to you'," John explained.

"Where's that one found, in the gospels somewhere, huh?"

"That's right. Let's see, here it is, Jn.5:5,6,14."

Femi paused, reflecting upon these things for some time. It really answered many puzzling questions. But still he was unclear about the role of anointed men of God in the healing process.

“That’s all right; I think I’ve got that much, but what about men of God who have the gift of healing? Can’t God heal through them anytime?”

“No.”

“No? Why not? If God has all power and He’s the same yesterday, today, and forever, why can’t He? I thought all things were possible with God?” Femi was really baffled now but he knew John had a reason for what he had said.

“You left out the key ingredient in the whole healing process, Femi.”

“I did?” his confusion was deepening, “I give up, what have I left out?”

“The will of God: It is not God’s will that all people be healed of all diseases at all times, not even among his faithful followers,” John was wanting to confront these false notions head-on so that there would be no mistake about them.

It had its intended effect upon his friend. “Well, you’d better do some explaining on that one, brother. That was quite a mouthful to swallow.”

“I was hoping you’d say something like that,” John was already happily turning the pages of his well-worn Bible. “No one, even if he has the gift of healing, can heal anytime according to his own decision. Elijah, Elisha, and Paul were all mightily used of God to perform signs and wonders, but none of them could do so unless it was God’s will.

“Look at Lk.4:25-27. How many widows and lepers received miracles from the Lord?”

“Why, just one widow and one leper.”

“Didn’t Elijah and Elisha have the power to perform signs and wonders?”

“Sure they did.”

“So why did only one widow and one leper receive blessing from God at that time?”

“Well, the verse says, ‘Elijah was sent to none of them’ except to that one widow. I guess that God Himself didn’t send him to any of the others,” Femi stopped here to ponder a moment then added, “Then that means that it wasn’t God’s will that all of them receive those blessings from His hand.”

“That’s right. It also shows us that neither Elijah nor Elisha could perform miracles anytime they chose. Miracles come from God, not from men, no matter how greatly gifted or anointed they may be. They had to wait upon the will and mercy of God.”

“But what about Paul, you mentioned him before. Didn’t he heal people everywhere he went?”

“God did use Paul to bless many people in this way, but Paul could not heal whenever he chose. Many people weren’t healed even though they were some of his closest workers. He says, ‘Trophimus I left sick at Miletus’ and he told Timothy to use a natural remedy for his ‘frequent illnesses.’”

“Huh, is that so? Where are those references? I want to write those down.”

“The first one is 2 Tim.4:20 and the one about Timothy is found in 1 Tim.5:23. Healing is granted, not by someone’s spiritual gift, but by the mercy of God. Epaphroditus, Paul’s close fellow-worker, nearly died, but God did not use Paul to heal him.

“And it wasn’t because either he or Paul were lacking in faith. Not at all: Rather, he was healed because ‘God had mercy on him:’ that’s in Phil.2:25-27. That’s how all supernatural works come to us, by the mercy of God alone.”

“So the manifestation of the miraculous isn’t really dependent upon us at all, is it?”

“You’re only saying what the Word of God has plainly stated in Rom.9:15,16, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy...So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.’ Mercy is not an obligation on God’s part, nor is it obtained by the will and effort of man.”

“So what was really happening at the vigil? Those reverends looked like they were handing out miracles like people pass out handbills.”

“It looked that way, didn’t it? But are you sure that this is what was really going on? You were on the front row seat, what did you observe?”

“Now that you mention it, some of it seemed to be nothing more than a routine technique that the man had developed on his own. One of them would pray the same exact words in an unknown tongue and then jerk his hands on the head of the person as if the power of God was

moving through him, and all the people fell down on the stage. I think that was more acrobatics than anything.”

“Listen, Femi, spiritual displays of ‘power’ are never an indication that the man doing them is spiritual in the least. The Corinthians lacked no gift [I Cor.1:7] and spoke in tongues more than any other church, yet Paul said that they were carnal [I Cor.3:1-3]. In fact, there will be many who will claim to have cast out demons, prophesied, and performed signs and wonders, all in the name of Jesus, whom Jesus said He never knew at all, not ever at any time.”

It was a sobering thing to contemplate, which he mused over silently. The implications were staggering to his fragile Pentecostal frame of reference. But he was past the point of blindly holding onto religious tradition. He truly wanted the truth and its liberating results to his heart.

He glanced at his notes and realized that he didn’t have that last passage written down. “What was that section about doing all those things in Jesus’ name and He saying He never knew them? That one was a technical bomb.”

“Mt.7:20-23.”

Femi leafed backwards through his New Testament and found the place. He carefully read it over again and noticed something else in connection with those deceivers mentioned in that passage. “Verse 20 says that we’ll know them by their fruits. How does this fit in with their 419 ministries?”

“Fruit is the only sure evidence of a man’s spirituality. That cannot be imitated, miracles can. The fruit is what we find mentioned in Eph.5:9, ‘The fruit of the Spirit consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth.’ If these things are not evident in a man’s life, he is not spiritual, no matter what his title, reputation, or powers claim.

“Spirituality is not determined by whether one performs signs and wonders or whether a man is healed or not. John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets, ‘performed no sign’ [Jn.10:41], yet was obviously one of the most spiritual men of all time.

“Paul himself preached the gospel to the Galatians ‘because of a bodily illness’ [Gal.4:13] and had a physical infirmity which God Himself refused to remove [2 Cor.12:7-10]. The Man of God, Elisha, died from a sickness which neither he nor God cured [2 Kings 13:14]. And I don’t think that we would want to find fault with any of their own faith, do you?”

“Never! It’s clear, brother, very clear. Habah! We’ve really been deceiving people haven’t we?” was Femi’s concluding comment. “But what of all those who were shouting, ‘I am healed, I am healed’? Didn’t they possess what they confessed?”

“Positive confession is a delusion not to be found in the Word of God. Most of the people were only chanting what they wanted to see happen, not what really had occurred. It’s what we’ve been told to do in order to claim our blessings, but it’s not biblical.”

“But I thought the Scriptures said that we should command God and that we are what we think and that death and life are in the power of the tongue and that if we decree a thing, it shall come to pass?” Femi earnestly rattled off the most frequently abused Bible texts from the reverends of Positive Confession.

John looked amused at how expertly he had recited this barrage of “proofs” for the techniques of this error. “Is that what the Word of God actually says, brother?” He was testing him to make a point.

“Why, sure, I think so, yeah,” he didn’t sound very certain when asked point-blank like that.

“Where?”

“What?” Femi was not expecting to have to defend himself.

“Where? Where in the Word of God does it say what you just told me? Do you know the references?”

His mouth opened as if to answer but no words came out. He self-consciously closed it again and tried to think, but he couldn’t produce even a single one. “Uh, I guess I don’t know” he admitted with a slight humiliation.

“If you don’t know where to find these verses, and you haven’t studied them for yourself in the Bible, then why are you so confident about what they supposedly say?”

John was right. “I guess I just believed what I was told, that’s all. Not a very good reason to believe something is it?” Femi confessed with a sense of shame.

“Let’s look at them, one by one. You decide for yourself if what you’ve been told is true or not, okay?” John spoke with gentleness, knowing that his previous point had entered his friend’s heart with conviction from the Lord.

“Brother, does a clay pot quarrel with the potter or tell him how to do his work?”

“It could never be.”

“What will be done to a son who quarrels his father and mother because they gave birth to him?”

“He’ll be rebuked and probably beaten.”

“Do we then command God and tell Him what to do?”

“It sounds pretty foolish when you look at it like that, doesn’t it? No, not at all: God commands us, but we don’t command Him. But where is that in the Bible, you haven’t told me yet.”

“Well done. Don’t believe what is not clearly taught in the Scriptures. What you just said sounded fine, but we are not to lean on our own understanding according to Prov.3:5. So, no matter how reasonable something sounds, we shouldn’t believe and practice it unless it can be demonstrated from the Word.”

It was Femi’s turn to look amused. “That sounds fine, John, but where do you find those illustrations of the clay and the son in the Scriptures?” he asked with a twinkle in his eye without suppressing a smile.

“Okay, okay, so I need to get the log out of my own eye first, right?” They both laughed together. “Read Isa.45:9-11 and you’ll see it.”

Femi was impressed as he read the text. It was all there, and besides that, John knew where it was and explained its true meaning as well. “But this doesn’t say anything about commanding God, it only shows God’s anger at those who would dare question Him or command Him about anything,” Femi, still somewhat puzzled, wanted to know where the false teachers of Positive Confession got their reference.

“You’re reading the NIV, I think?” Femi nodded a “Yes.” “Let me read v.11 in the KJV, ‘...concerning the work of My hands command ye Me.’

“That’s where they get it, but I think it’s obvious from the context that the meaning they give to it could never be. Read verse 11 again in your NIV and you’ll see what I mean.”

Femi read out loud, “Concerning things to come, do you question Me about My children, or give Me orders about the work of My hands?” He shook his head in amazement. “It’s clear! How can a puny sinful man command the Almighty Creator? It’s foolishness!

“But what of the verse that says, ‘As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he’? Doesn’t that teach us to think positively and confess what we think and it will come to pass?”

“You tell me. Read Prov.23:1-8 and let me know what God is saying.” Femi eagerly took up the challenge.

“Well, God is warning us about being greedy and how our greed can delude us into being deceived by men who speak one thing and do another,” he looked at John to see if he approved thus far.

“Go on, go on,” John encouraged.

“So, the wicked rich man may say very pleasant things, but in his heart, he is thinking something altogether different. We shouldn’t be misled by such lying hypocrisy,” he concluded with confidence that he had understood the passage.

“So where is Positive Confession found in this text?”

“Hey-eh!” He exclaimed with contempt, “Nowhere; Nowhere at all. Cai! I’ve never even bothered to read this before. Hey-eh, we really need to examine everything carefully, eh?”

“It’s true, brother. Now, you mentioned Prov.18:21...”

“I did?”

“Yeah, you just didn’t know it,” John grinned at him, “Proverbs has much to say about the tongue and our words, and chapter 18 needs to be understood in light of that. If we have this broader background as our context, we will see how 18:21 summarizes the general truth it expresses about the tongue.”

“Okay, so what is this broader context you’re talking about?”

“Turn to Prov.12:13. What kind of words does an evil man speak?”

“Sinful words.”

“And what happens to him?”

“He’s trapped by them.”

“Look again in Prov.13:3. What do we learn about our words here?”

“Well, some people control their tongues and are blessed in life, but others just speak anyhow without regard for anyone but themselves and it destroys them,” Femi was already making the connection with 18:21 in his mind, “So, our words really give expression to whether we are righteous or wicked and whether we have eternal life or not.”

“That’s it, brother. It’s the same thing that Jesus Himself said in Mt.12:34-37. Let me read it, ‘Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

“‘But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.’ It’s the same thing that Prov.18:21 is telling us.”

“I can see it clearly. It seems that these men just kind of pull a verse from the Bible out of the air to support whatever funny doctrines they invent.”

“It’s exactly what has been done. I think you’ll see the same thing as we look at Job 22:28.”

“What does that one say?”

“Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee.”

“Isn’t that a direct promise from God?”

“Was God the One who was speaking to Job, or was it someone else?”

“I don’t know. I just assumed it was the Lord, the way I’ve always heard it quoted,” Femi was curious now, suspecting that it wasn’t God’s promise at all.

“It wasn’t God who spoke that to Job, it was Eliphaz. He’s the one who has been speaking from verse one throughout this whole chapter. His basic message was that all the calamities had come upon Job because of his sin and departure from the Lord.

“Look at his accusations against this righteous man. He said that Job’s wickedness was great [v.5] and that he had never done any righteous thing to others [v.6-9]. So, he called Job to yield to God [v.21], receive instruction [v.22], return to the Almighty [v.23], and cease pursuing his own riches [v.24]. Then he said that Job would be restored [v.23], God would hear his prayer [v.27], and what he decrees would come about [v.28].”

“Well, wasn’t what he was saying true?”

“Not according to the Lord. Look at what God said about Eliphaz’s words in Job 42:7, ‘The Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has.”’”

“So, all his accusations and solutions weren’t really correct at all then?”

“You’ve seen it. Eliphaz was telling Job that no one was honoring or obeying him any longer because of his sinful departure from the Lord. People thought that God was cursing Job and so they didn’t want anything to do with him. It’s what Job himself was lamenting in chapter 19:13-19.

“Eliphaz was saying, in effect, ‘If you would just quit sinning, then people would honor you once again and do the things you command them to as they did formerly.’ But there is nothing in this passage that even remotely resembles Positive Confession.”

“Huh, Positive Confession,” Femi remarked sarcastically, “It’s more like Positive Confusion. We really need to just stick to the Bible and nothing else, isn’t it?”

“That’s it, Femi, ‘To the law and the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no light,’ John quoted and then added before Femi could open his mouth, “You’ll find that one in Isa.8:20.”

~

“Good morning! Anyone around?” it was John’s first customer of the morning.

“Good morning, Ma, how de day? You’re welcome!” came John’s friendly reply as he moved to the front of the shop. Femi remained seated, half paying attention to the scene in the shop before him as he continued to rehearse their previous conversation.

The woman had found some cloth which appealed to her and began the bargaining process to beat down the price to her liking. But she had a surprise coming as she had not traded with John before. His first price was only N200 above his final.

She had been to many other shops before visiting his own. She knew her prices and was shocked to hear how low his first one was. She even said so, "That's a very good price, Sir, much lower than the opening prices I've met elsewhere."

"We give the glory to God, Ma, the Lord Jesus taught us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. It's how I try to run my business," was John's simple reply.

Femi was paying much closer attention to the transaction now.

The woman seemed taken aback, no, more of moved in her heart by John's response. She only bargained to lower the final price by ₦ 100 less than his first quote. John measured and wrapped her purchase and then counted the money extended to him as she quietly watched him, showing some evidence of an inner burden unexpressed as of yet.

"It's complete, Ma, thank you very much, I'm grateful."

"Yes, thank you, Sir. You, uh, have an unusual approach to doing business," she ventured to remark with a disguised but deep longing to speak to someone who might relieve her personal turmoil.

"The Lord Jesus said that, to the extent that we do something to the least of His brethren, we've done it unto Him. I try to treat every customer as if I'm serving Christ Himself," he replied with all humility.

It was all that the woman needed to hear. She had found a genuine man of God in this humble brother. "Please, Sir, I don't want to annoy you or waste your time, but may I bother you about a matter that is troubling me?" she asked hesitantly.

"Please, Ma, it's no bother at all. Please, take your seat; if I can help in any way, I'll be happy to. What's on your mind?" was John's kindly reply.

Femi sat in fascination, unseen from the back of the shop, as the woman unfolded her situation for some minutes. John patiently and skillfully referred her to one passage after another from the Scriptures, pointing out her true need to repent of her sins and receive Christ Jesus as Lord. Then to Femi's utter amazement, he heard John leading her in a prayer of commitment of her life to the Lord Jesus.

The woman wept and then rejoiced. Her burden had vanished. She had become a new creation in Christ; the old had disappeared, behold, all things had become new.

John welcomed her to fellowship in his home on Sunday afternoon, "My wife will be too happy to know you and have you join with us and other friends as we worship God together. May the Lord bless you."

She assured him that she would and collected the address from him before leaving.

Femi was dumbfounded. In all of his time as a pastor, he had never actually led anyone to Christ. He wasn't even sure of how to go about it. *I've got a lot to learn. And this simple brother puts me to shame. God bless brother John. I'm so blessed to have him as my friend.*

"John, thank God, brother, thank the Lord. That woman just got truly saved, didn't she?"

"I believe so. There's no greater joy than seeing someone respond to the Word of God," he said with a knowing glance in Femi's direction, "even among those who have known it for some time," he grinned at him directly this time.

Femi was embarrassed but happy to think that John had noticed some progress in him. He was curious about the Sunday fellowship as he hadn't known of its existence before now. "So, you have a Christian meeting in your home Sunday afternoons? How long has that been going on?"

"Oh, for some time now, I guess, I can't remember exactly. Why, do you want to join us?" he asked with a hopeful note in his voice.

"Sure, why not? I've got to keep track of what my friends are up to anyway," Femi teased with a smile and then threw out a question that had, just at that moment, popped into his head, "Why didn't you invite her to Christ's Tabernacle for Sunday service?"

John was silent for a brief moment then flatly stated, "I didn't want her faith to be stumbled by the love of money she'd meet there."

Femi only sighed and hung his head. It was a sad but true indictment. Love of money reigned there as the undisputed lord of the place: well, almost undisputed. Those who dared challenge Mammon do not last long in his environs.

And Femi's days were numbered, though he, as of yet, did not know it.

8

"God is soooo good! I, I hardly know what to say," Suki fairly gushed into the cordless mike. "It pays to serve the Lord! Amen?"

"Amen!!" came the thunderous rejoinder from the capacity crowd at Christ's Tabernacle of Glory. They knew already what had happened to Suki, about her new Mercedes. Now, with great relish, they awaited the juicy details, and Suki would be sure to dish them out a full portion.

"You all know how, some time ago on Sunday morning, right here in Christ's Tabernacle of Glory, I planted my seed-faith offering of ₦ 250,000. Oh, Hallelujah! Hallelujah! H-A-L-L-E-L-U-J-A-H!!"

They were shouting it with her in wild abandon. What they had all been longing for, what they all envied and coveted in the depths of their souls, was parading before their very eyes: living proof that God rewards seed-faith offerings. They were beside themselves with ecstasy, anticipating their own breakthroughs.

"Doesn't the Scripture say that God will do exceedingly abundantly beyond anything we ask or think?" Suki had learned well how to twist the Bible herself.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" They were all asking and thinking as big as they dared so that God would exceed even that for them.

"It was like God just dropped my car right out of heaven. I don't even know where it came from except I was told that some anonymous anointed men of God dashed it to me," she reported with wonderment so as to emphasize the supernatural mystery of it all.

"What I do know is this, God decrees that what you confess, you will possess!" she mouthed the worn-out slogan of every Prosperity preacher who has ever lived as if it were Gospel.

"A-M-E-N!!" they wanted it to be true whether it was or not.

"We're here to celebrate! We're here to jubilate! We're here to give thanks! We're here to plant and to water! The harvest will come! The harvest will come! Say it with me now, 'The harvest will come!'"

Like so many programmed mechanical robots, the vast assemblage repeated the phrase as if chanting to their god, "The harvest will come! The harvest will come!" The hall rang and reverberated with the cadence.

They were convinced. They had seen it with their own eyes: at least they thought they had. What was actually true was not their concern nor what the Bible truly taught. Enough "evidence" had presented itself to justify their own greed to their deceived minds.

But they were only deceived because they wanted to be. The congregation were victims of nothing except their own desires. Their coming to church was not to learn to deny themselves, but rather to indulge the deadly longing for riches which had gained a stranglehold upon their souls.

And now, Suki, a Goliath-like goddess, was before them to champion their cause. They hailed her, adoringly, awaiting the command to advance and take possession of the promised land.

"Let's bring them now! The sacrifices of praise! Thank offerings! Seeds of faith! Let them not be small, for He is worthy! He is worthy of the biggest and the best!"

“Do not disappoint Him and He will not disappoint you! Come! Come! Rise and be blessed! P-R-A-I-S-E THE L-O-R-D!!” Suki’s advertisement slid directly into an explosive song-fest.

On their feet immediately, they pressed forward zealously to give in order to get. They viewed themselves as shareholders in a divine investment plan with more certain returns than any lottery or stock market could ever promise.

Blessed was among them, swaying joyously while being swept along by the mighty current of worshiping seekers who flowed to the altar with offerings waving aloft. She was elated, even rapturous. Her long awaited breakthrough was just around the corner, she was certain.

Femi turned and looked at her from his front-row pastor’s seat as she danced up the aisle. For just an instant, his sober grief-stricken eyes met her excited anticipating gaze. Immediately, like cold water poured upon glowing coals, her enthusiasm was quenched and a cloud of conviction rose in its place.

“Those who want to get rich fall into temptation...” spoke the Holy Spirit to her heart. Her husband was not the only one who was grieved, so was the Spirit of God, and she knew it. With a look bordering on desperation she was gone, helplessly swept on by the mighty current of worshipers surging behind and all around her.

At the moment, there was no turning back. Her now defiled gift was laid at the altar in honor of whom or what she no longer knew. The program, like an impersonal machine, pushed her along to her appointed place and deposited her there and proceeded on, oblivious to its individual participants.

The participants had a function to perform, that’s all. Fulfill it, and all was well, from the program’s standpoint, that is. All was not well in the hearts of the participants, though. The disparity between the program and the Word of God could not have been more complete and many were aware of it.

Within Blessed’s soul, the struggle she had suppressed for some time resurfaced with full intensity. *It’s raw selfishness, what I just did. O, how can I continue like this, torn between two things?*

Seeking riches is evil, the Word of God says so, but why can’t I give it up? Why does it have such a hold on me? Why do I keep returning to it? May God help me.

She was merely disturbed at the conflict raging within her. Mammon’s hook was still lodged in her heart and it would require major surgery to remove it. Only the Great Physician can perform the operation successfully. But He can only apply His skill on repentant patients. And Blessed, as of yet, was not one of them.

Benson smiled at what he saw, Suki and money. All suspicion had vanished from his mind about her sincerity. She was serving his purposes admirably, or so he thought.

In fact, I was not only able to buy the car, there was money left over for me to pocket when all was said and done. Of course, what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her. She’s got what she wants, and I’ve got what I want. What else matters?

“Evil men will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” - 2 Tim.3:13. That matters.

~

“And to what do I owe the honor of your presence here this morning, my dear Pastor?” Mary was already chuckling to herself in her typical manner as Femi entered the church office.

Bowing low with a theatrical flourish, he joined in the lighthearted greeting, “Why, my most high secretary general, it is surely only to visit you and pay my due respects.”

Mary bubbled over with glee at that, “That’s a good one! Most high secretary general, indeed. Wait till I tell Peter. I don’t think he knows just who he’s married to!” she was laughing again at her own humor.

The talk turned to newsy mundane things and eventually to the real reason for his visit. But Mary loved to talk, so Femi indulged her for some time.

“I tell you, that was a mighty display of the Lord’s power in the miraculous provision of Sister Suki’s Mercedes, wasn’t it?” she went on as if it was so obvious that no reply was needed. “It’s a real testimony. I’m so happy for her.

“She’s such a sweet thing and so talented. We’re really blessed to have her here on staff,” she chortled on as if every thought found an immediate release through her tongue.

Mary was a simple soul, trusting and always thinking the best of everyone. She and her husband both were long on kindness and short on discernment, not to be critical, but to state things as they actually were.

It’s why Benson had chosen her to be the church secretary and why Peter headed up the weekly visitation program. They both performed their tasks without asking questions while making all people feel welcomed and at home.

“And her CDs are such an inspiration to thousands. It was really of the Lord that we bought that fancy recording equipment. I don’t know how the ministry could have expanded as it has without her—” she was interrupted by her husband’s entrance into the office.

They were creatures of habit. Every day at precisely 12:00, he pulled up in their ancient Peugeot 504 and they both went off together for the ten-minute drive to their flat for lunch.

“Oh, Peter, is it time already? I’ve been so busy here this morning, I guess time just got away from me. Let’s see, where’s the house key?” she rummaged through her desk drawer where she kept their one house key stored. They were rather frugal and so decided that one key was really all they needed.

“Ah, here it is. Sometimes it slips off this old key chain. We really should get another one sometime, dear. But, we can do that later. Pastor Femi, we’re off to lunch now so you just make yourself at home, okay?”

“Thank you, Ma’am. Good afternoon, Sir. How has your day been?” Femi actually had grown to like Pastor Peter.

“Fine, thank you. We’ve really been busy lately, though, with all the new people coming to the church since the vigil. Well, we thank God in everything. It keeps me out of trouble, anyway,” he added with a smile.

“Trouble? Which kind of trouble do you get into? Are you keeping secrets from me?” Mary was laughing again at her own joke. She was really her own best audience.

“Please, Ma, before you go, I did wish to see the Reverend about a few things.”

“Oh, no problem. Just go on in. He and Sister Suki are just listening to some CDs to decide which songs to feature on the upcoming program,” Mary called over her shoulder as they turned to go.

“Oh, Peter, you should have heard how Pastor Femi greeted me this morning. It was so funny. Do you know...” the door closed upon their exit cutting off her near constant banter.

Femi turned to the inner office door where the Suki Singers could be heard at rather high volume from within. He knocked before entering and, upon hearing no response, knocked again and swung the door open according to Mary’s instruction.

Benson and Suki were embracing on the sofa, totally unaware of his presence. Femi froze in shocked disbelief. Instantly the scene of their holding hands flashed through his mind.

So, I wasn’t imagining things after all. I knew that their love of money wasn’t of God but I didn’t know that this was going on as well. This is wickedness.

Suki was the first to open her eyes which flashed in fear but quickly filled like two black pools with hatred. Benson sensed her reaction and turned to glance behind him. Femi stood stiffly, gazing at them resolutely.

“What in the—how did you get in here?!” Benson bellowed like a wounded bull.

“Mary told me to just come in. So I knocked, and when you didn’t answer, I entered,” Femi replied firmly and with surprising composure.

“That stupid woman. How many times have I told her—Get out of my way,” Benson roughly pushed Femi aside as he charged into the outer office to set Mary straight.

Surprising even himself, Femi turned to Suki and said, “What you are doing is not good-O.”

With curled lips, hyena like, she snarled, “Says you, small boy!” Suddenly Femi saw her for what she really was, an ugly evil beast of a woman. This realization emboldened him the more.

“I Cor.7:1,2 says, ‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife.’ You need to repent.”

Suki only turned her face away in disgust and said nothing.

Benson had burst outside the office when he didn't find Mary at her desk. Muttering a low curse, he turned and roared back into his private office to face Femi.

Benson slowly circled Femi, seething with rage like a caged lion, knowing he was trapped, but furiously searching for a way of escape and finding none. Finally, he sprang.

"Listen, you worthless dog," the Rev. Dr. was trembling, shaking an accusing finger of warning in Femi's face, "if you breathe one word to anyone," his arms swung wildly to emphasize his point, "you will wish you'd never been born."

Femi withstood the blast unshaken. He calmly fixed his eyes upon the G.O.'s heaving frame and simply said, 'Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the bed undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge' -Heb.13:4.

He may as well of hit him with a club. Benson actually took a step back as if staggered by this hammer from the Word of God. Almost as if dazed, he stared for some seconds until an untamed sound like a low growl emitted from his throat. His eyes had taken on a strange reddish tone and his breath came with short jerks. Then the volcano erupted.

He rushed at Femi swinging madly, but purposefully, to knock his Bible from his hand to the floor. "I've told you once, don't ever quote that thing to me," he rasped with disdain. "Now get out or I'll throw you out!" he hissed, serpent like, through clenched teeth.

Femi retrieved his precious companion from where it had so ruthlessly been scattered and, with one final look of rebuke at them both, passed through the door to the outside into God's open air.

Inside, the godless couple sat, each brooding silently over what had just transpired. Each was lost in their own separate worlds, thinking only of self. No loyalty passed between them, no concern for the other, for it did not exist. What consumed them both was the preservation of their own schemes, both of which seemed to be threatened.

"So what do we do now?" it was Suki who broke the silence, this time with no immediate solution at her fingertips.

"Do? Don't worry. I know just what to do to derail this Bible boy. When I'm finished with him, he'll never have chance to disrupt this ministry again," Benson spoke with a determined, even chilling, finality.

"You're not going to do anything, well, I mean, drastic, are you?" she was not wishing to have hand in violence or any such thing.

He whirled and faced her squarely, "I know what I'm doing and this time, you'll just have to wait and see," the matter was closed as far as he was concerned.

He liked the regained feeling of command it gave him to see Suki subject to his plan, not even knowing what it was. Yes, he liked that very well.

~

The curtain pushed aside as he entered the parlor, sending light streaming across the floor which silently announced his arrival. Blessed had glimpsed the flash of light and called out, "Femi, is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me," he replied wearily with a note of discouragement.

She soon joined him with the customary cup of water brought for her man. "How was the morning, dear?" she had noticed his tone of voice upon entering.

"Oh, not too bad. That Mary can sure talk! You'd better be prepared to listen when you come around the church office," he forced a grin, not really wanting to discuss what he had witnessed at the moment. He was tired of conflict presently and didn't want to provoke one in his own home at this time.

Blessed seemed satisfied with that and thought he was probably just a little tired. So, she turned the conversation to other things, hoping to cheer him up a bit and then served up lunch.

He enjoyed the peace in his home this afternoon. It was absolutely the opposite of what he had just come from and he basked in its warmth while he could. He loved his wife and he knew that she loved him, a complete contrast to what he had just experienced.

They ate and chatted away about things that he couldn't even remember afterwards. But it didn't matter, really, because love was there and trust and delight in each other's company, which comes from that pure bond of oneness called marriage.

He was greatly comforted and full of thanks for this most tender of God's mercies in this life, a faithful loving wife and devoted companion. He reached out and gently stroked her cheek, "I truly love you with all my heart."

Gladness shone through her quickly misting eyes while within her breast fluttered the thrill of hearing those words once again. His words had both delighted and humbled her. She knew that she was not all that she could be and certainly not all that she should be, and he loved her still.

She was certain of it and this was a steadfast consolation to her soul in the midst of all of life's storms they faced together. "Oh, Femi," she leaned her head upon his shoulder, "I am so fortunate to have you for my husband. You've been so good to me," she nuzzled close in deep gratitude. "I truly love you with all my heart," she whispered in gentle affection.

Femi felt the drop of a warm tear upon his hand. "Say, what's this all about, little lady?" his words were tender, not chastening, but showed his loving concern.

Self-consciously she wiped at her eyes which had uncontrollably spilled over their joy. "I'm just happy, that's all," she composed herself somewhat and added meekly, "and very humbled. I'm not worthy of such love," the tears were flowing again, not bitterly, but in wonder and thanks.

Gently he tipped her chin so their eyes met. "Worthy or not, you are loved and I thank God for you," Femi spoke with all affection and truth.

Blessed's arms entwined about his neck where they remained for some time, resting in the shade of her beloved whose banner overhead was love. Neither did he hasten to disrupt the quiet and holy peace of those moments. It was as a soothing balm to both of them. It was as it should be.

The purity and trust of marital love and faithfulness is a true sanctum for spiritual graces. In this fertile environment, there is encouragement without condemnation, correction without arrogance, and assistance from the mutually dependent. It was this atmosphere that prompted Blessed's next exclamation.

"I was so ashamed of myself on Sunday. Oh, why did I do that?" she was expressing true remorse, not merely frustration. Real love excludes pretense but nurtures honest disclosure of the heart's secrets and longings.

"Do what, Dear?" Femi softly inquired, suspecting that he knew already what she referred to.

"I just joined in with everybody else. I let myself be carried along with the crowd, though I knew in my heart I wasn't truly worshipping God. Really, it was nothing but greediness and envy. How could God ever approve of that!"

Lord, I thank You for this conviction of the Holy Spirit to my wife's heart. Surely Your Word does not return void. "It's true, dear," he answered with kindness in his voice, 'Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart,'" he quoted I Sam.16:7.

"But when I look at you, I see an inner strength to stand for what you know is right. That, I don't seem to have," her eyes were pleading with him for help. "Like when you spoke about offerings that one Sunday, what you said I knew was true, but I was so embarrassed by what people might think or say about me. I just wanted to hide. You're not like that," she looked at him with admiration.

Please, Lord, give me wisdom to lead my wife into Your light. "Blessed, dear, God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. His grace is sufficient for the helpless," he began, testing the waters to sense her reaction. She continued to lift longing eyes, awaiting more.

"It's when we lose our lives that we find that which is truly life indeed. Unless you deny yourself, you cannot be Christ's disciple," then hastily added, "It was Jesus Himself who said it," hoping that she wouldn't think he was "preaching" at her.

"It always comes back to that, doesn't it?" she said pensively as she sensed that struggle within begin to surface again.

“Yes, it does. The Scriptures warn us that the double-minded man is blown back and forth like a wave of the sea. That kind of person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord,” Femi boldly, but calmly, spoke to his wife.

This time, there was no offended or defensive reaction. She quietly submitted to the words spoken by her husband, pondering them in her heart.

“Where can I read that passage about being double-minded? That seems to describe me pretty well. I...,” she paused, knowing that she had not been faithful in Bible reading, much less in actual study, up until now, “I want to read it for myself in the Word of God,” she finished, expressing both shame and a new determination.

“Uh, let me see if I can find it,” Femi reached for his Bible and began racking his brain for the reference. The pages flipped almost randomly as he silently prayed for the Lord to help him find it for his wife’s sake. “I just read it the other day, in the Epistles, I think,” he scanned through some of Paul’s letters, but this didn’t sound like something Paul would have said.

He quickly passed on through Hebrews. No, this is not it. *Lord, please show me. Blessed really wants to know Your truth.* Turning the page, the word “double-minded” seemed to leap off the page at him.

“Here it is,” he exclaimed with glad relief, “James 1:6-8.”

Blessed looked at him with deepening respect. *Why, he’s a true man of God. I hadn’t thought of him like that before. He knows the Word of God and isn’t afraid to speak it, to me or to anyone. I really love this man.*

“Thank you, dear,” she had made a note of it, “You’ve really been a help to me,” her eyes reflected the appreciation and respect that filled her heart.

“Thank the Lord, sweetheart, He’s the only One who can enable anyone to do anything good,” Femi humbly replied.

As if returning to a restful haven, Blessed leaned her head on Femi’s breast, surrounded by the comfort of his strong arms. Minutes passed in this calm repose before her question sent gentle ripples upon these still waters.

“The Lord asks a lot from us, doesn’t He?”

Another calm settled upon this holy scene before he simply said, “No, He doesn’t ask a lot, He asks for everything.”

Ripples from this stone would continue to move upon her soul until she yielded completely to the Great Shepherd who was calling her to follow Him.

And that decision, though she had come far, had not yet been made.

~

Many buyers were jostling one another as they examined first one cloth and then another in John’s ever increasingly popular place of business. Femi was hoping to have a few private moments with him, but it was obvious that it wouldn’t be now. He wandered about, distractedly fingering various weaves, waiting for an opportunity to speak to him.

“John, I really need to see you right away about a serious matter,” Femi spoke in low tones during a brief break in the rush of customers. More had just entered the door.

“Meet me at the house this evening by 5:00 for our home-church meeting. We can talk afterwards. Okay, bro.?” John replied before two women fought their way in his direction, each trying to be attended to before the other.

“No problem. See you then,” Femi called over the arguing women’s heads as he beat a hasty retreat from the crowded shop.

~

No small boy who dares to challenge a President and Founder will be believed by anyone, especially when he has no witnesses. All of them know he’s already tried to contradict the pillar of Prosperity that this ministry is built upon. Even if he does say something, they’ll only think he’s resorting to slander in his continued rebellion.

I've got nothing to worry about from this pest of a pastor. But I'll eliminate him anyway. No one, I mean no one, dares to talk to me like that! There's too much at stake not to remove him. He'll know who he's dealing with, soon. Yes, very soon.

~

“Welcome, brother!” before he knew it, John had given him a warm hug upon Femi’s entering the parlor where several unfamiliar faces had already gathered. “Let me introduce you to some of the brethren.”

As they made the rounds, he discovered that each one expressed a heartfelt welcome to him. There was a holy seriousness about them undergirded with a purity of joy in this loving fellowship. He couldn’t help but contrast it with the impersonal self-seeking weekly performance at Christ’s Tabernacle.

He was introduced as brother Femi, with no mention of what church he attended or that he was a pastor. Those kinds of things didn’t seem important to them in this simple gathering. It was kind of refreshing to him, not to have to fill an expected role.

Femi didn’t know really what to anticipate. His only frame of reference was the Pentecostalism he had been immersed in for years. This was certainly new and strange to him, though appealingly so.

“Brother Femi, you’re highly welcome!” it was John’s wife, Priscilla, a gentle quiet woman, full of love and hospitality. “Blessed not with you this evening?” she remarked, glancing around the room, “I hope she’s fine. Send her my love and greetings,” it was genuine concern and kindness, not a mere formality.

“Thank you very much. No, she stayed home this evening, but she is doing fine, thank you,” he was touched by her sincerity.

Another couple arrived. The wife looked familiar somehow but he didn’t recall seeing the husband before. *Where do I know this woman from? Has she been to Christ’s Tabernacle? No, that’s not it. Where do I— That’s it! She’s the woman whom John led to the Lord in his shop that morning!*

They were introduced to Femi who could see that this woman had continued in the faith. Inwardly, he rejoiced at the goodness of the Lord in saving and in keeping His own.

When he could ask John privately, he voiced his curiosity. “I thought that you had a Sunday afternoon fellowship. Why are you meeting like this in the middle of the week?”

“Oh, several of the brethren had special programs at their churches this week, so we all agreed to shift it to this evening. All of us wanted to do that rather than cancel it altogether.”

Femi was impressed. *You could never do that at our church. The Reverend would never allow anything to interfere with his program. Even if it was rescheduled, no one would show up anyway. But these people were there because they wanted to be there. It was not by force, no, something else was motivating them.* Femi was more than curious, he was intrigued.

“Who’s going to lead the praise and worship this evening?” Femi wanted to know.

John just smiled at him, “We hope that the Lord Jesus does.”

The answer took him by surprise. He had never witnessed a meeting without someone being designated to lead the congregation. *What kind of meeting is this, anyway?*

“Well, then, who is bringing the sermon tonight? It seemed like a reasonable question to him. Surely someone had been appointed beforehand.

“We won’t know until after the meeting is in progress. We’ll just have to wait and see how the Holy Spirit leads the various brethren. The Lord won’t disappoint us,” was his confident simple response.

Femi had no category to place that answer in. It was completely foreign to all he had previously experienced. He started to ask another question but only closed his mouth instead. *I guess I’ll find out soon enough what this thing is all about.*

“You’re welcome to encourage and exhort us with anything that the Lord has put on your heart, brother,” John sincerely informed his friend.

“Uh, thanks, John, maybe I will.” *But how will I know what to say? I haven’t prepared any message for these people.*

Someone began a chorus taken from the Psalms and everyone joined in, seemingly singing from their hearts as unto the Lord. Femi enjoyed it. There was something different about their singing that he couldn't account for at first.

It's not the song itself or the volume, and it's certainly not a performance or religious noise making. There's an intensity of devotion about it. That's it, devotion. These people are devoted to Christ.

A brother led the group in a quiet prayer of thanks to the Father for the greatness of His majesty as God. The others prayed along in silence, only contributing an "Amen" at suitable moments. Femi was deeply moved by the simplicity of his reverence.

"Hallowed be Thy name." These brethren speak to God as if this is really true. A fearful holy respect for the Lord and a humble lowliness among themselves is very evident in all that they do.

"I'd like us to consider for a few moments the greatness of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Let's turn to 2 Samuel chapter nine," a brother unknown to Femi was speaking.

How does he know what to say just like that without having prepared his sermon beforehand during the week? And how did he know when he should speak up?

"David wanted to show lovingkindness to someone for the sake of Jonathan. There was brought to him one man who was lame in both feet who lived in Lo-debar, which means, 'a thing of nothing.'

"David showed him kindness, restored all the inheritance which had been lost, and brought him to his own table to eat regularly in the presence of the king. Mephibosheth prostrated himself and said, 'What is your servant, that you should regard a dead dog like me?' That's in verse eight.

"This is what the God of heaven, the great King of glory has done for us. He wants to show His lovingkindness to unworthy sinners for the sake of the Lord Jesus. He restores to us the spiritual inheritance which had been lost and brings us into His very presence to partake of the blessings of His Word.

"Truly we are no better than dead dogs, things of nothing, when we consider our own miserable and wretched state because of our sins. This man sat at the king's table where the lameness of his feet was no more seen. All he saw there was the face of the king himself while sharing in daily fellowship with him.

"God, in His infinite mercies, has looked down upon us – lame, dead dogs, nothing – and rather than casting us off as disgusting objects of His wrath [which we surely are], He was looking to show His love to us and restore us from our miserable state.

"Thank God for Christ Jesus! Where would we be without Him? May the Lord be glorified in each of our hearts and lives for His name's sake."

Solemn yet grateful "Amen's" could be heard throughout the now hushed parlor. Silence continued for some minutes as seemingly each one was reflecting deeply upon this Word from God and praying to their Father in secret.

Femi was nearly breathless with wonder as the brother spoke. He had never heard teaching like this before. It was marvelous in his eyes.

And he's just a simple brother, not a professional preacher. He said more in these few moments than most Reverends say in two hours. Amazing!

"Let's join together and sing *O God of Matchless Grace*. I think we have enough copies for everyone to share," brother John made his contribution to the worship.

*O God of matchless grace,
We sing unto Thy name.
We stand accepted in the place,
That none but Christ can claim!
Our willing hearts,
Have heard Thy voice,
And in Thy mercy we rejoice!*

The song continued through its remaining three stanzas expressing magnificent truths about the Lord Jesus and His so-great a salvation. *I've never sang songs so profound in spiritual depth*

before. All we know are those silly little 'ditties' about being a 'winner man' or telling the Holy Ghost that 'we're here again,' as if He didn't know we were there anyway. This is deep!

A sister prayed a simple prayer of thanks for the Lord having shown His mercy to her after the hymn concluded. Another silence followed. Some heads were bowed, others lifted their own upwards in adoration to the God of matchless grace.

There was no hurry to rush ahead with the evening's program. There was no program directing them, no time schedule to be maintained, no passive observation of other's worship. They were all participants.

Had they done and said nothing, nothing would have been done at all. Yet no pre-arrangements had been made, no pre-service meeting with the "staff" as Femi was accustomed to.

"I want us to consider this love and mercy from yet another aspect as well. Thank God for what our brother has shared. It is a true encouragement and refreshment to our hearts, I'm sure. Turn to Rom.8:28-39. Someone please read this for us," still another brother was opening the Word of God for the blessing of the group.

And so the meeting continued: some praying, a testimony was shared, a prayer request mentioned, both for prayer as well as for counsel from the Scriptures. All was interspersed with choruses and hymns as brother after brother had contributions of teaching and exhortation from the Bible.

It's all so orderly, yet no man is telling anyone what to do. They treat each other as equals, no, more than that, like family. And the women don't lead or teach. I'll have to ask John about that later. It's completely different than Christ's Tabernacle, that's for sure.

"The Lord has blessed us with many precious thoughts about His love, this evening," the husband of the woman from the cloth shop began. *It's true! I hadn't thought of it until now, but there was a definite theme with all that was shared throughout the evening. God is wonderful!*

"Let's remember Him now for the greatest expression of His love to us, in the gift of His own Son, represented by the bread and cup before us.

"It's really a simple memorial, not a ritual at all like so many have turned it into. Let's consider the bread together for a moment before we partake.

"The mature grain was cut down in its prime, then sifted and crushed to a fine powder. It was pure and uniform in texture, with no contaminating elements of its own.

"Then leaven was mixed into the dough and placed in a heated oven for an appointed time. There, the leaven was killed so that it could not spread its influence any longer.

"What resulted was bread for man which satisfies his hunger and provides both life and blessing. 'This,' Jesus said, 'is My body.'

"He gave Himself for us and was cut off from the land of living though He had no sin of His own. He was bruised and crushed for our iniquities. Our sin was placed upon Him like the leaven was mixed with the dough.

"In the fiery oven of God's wrath upon the cross, sin was destroyed once and for all. It is Christ who is the bread of God, giving life to the world.

"He wants us not merely to admire, but to partake. This bread is to be received and taken into our innermost being where it will transform us from the inside out. He will become our life and strength. We will live through Him.

"The cup represents what the Lord Jesus has done on our behalf. The bread shows us Christ's person, while the cup portrays His work of redemption. It symbolizes the blood of a new covenant, a whole new relationship with God.

"We drink the cup to show that the blood of Jesus cleanses us within. It does not regulate us from without like the old covenant attempted to do. That was an external law which made demands but provided no power to do what it required.

"Jesus has done something altogether different. He has given a new spirit, cleansing within, and His law written upon our hearts, not on tablets of stone.

"In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he says, 'Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup.' That's found in I Cor.11:28. That's why it is called 'communion,' because it expresses our true relationship with God in fellowship with Christ Jesus our Lord.

“We must walk in the light in order to have fellowship with God. And it is in walking in the light that we also have fellowship with each other as we are doing here this evening. I trust that we will all truly and humbly ask God to search our own hearts so that we may partake in a worthy manner for His name’s sake.”

“Amen” were softly heard from most of the brethren gathered that evening as they worshiped in the beauty of holiness.

Another brother prayed a simple heartfelt and reverent prayer of thanks to God for the gift of His Son, after which, the bread was passed from one to the other. Each took a piece and ate it with a deep meditation mixed with sobriety and joy. The cup was shared in a like manner by one and all.

Some moments of holy silence lingered in the stillness of their communion. No one seemed anxious to break the tranquility of that atmosphere.

Finally, one brother related with sympathy, “Our brother, Kunle, wounded his leg on the farm and will likely not be able to join us for some time. He sends his love and greetings to everyone.”

“How will he be able to finish planting his farm, then? Does he have any help?” brother John inquired with concern.

“I don’t think so. He was even wondering out loud what he was going to do. Maybe we can help him,” he added eagerly as he glanced around the room.

“It’s a good idea, brother. When can we arrange to do it?” John asked the general question to all assembled. Following a brief discussion, Saturday was decided upon for all to come and complete the planting.

“We sisters will provide the food for everyone as well as helping with the farm work,” Priscilla added with willing gladness.

“Thank God for wives of virtue,” one brother interjected with a broad smile. “Amen” were heard from the whole group of contented men which fell upon their spouses’ ears of this loving fellowship.

“Also, let’s ask the Lord what he might have each of us do as far as possibly giving some amount for his family’s feeding during the time of his recovery. Whatever the Lord may put upon our hearts, we can bring for them on Saturday.”

“It’s good. Let’s commit them and ourselves into the hands of God before we depart.” Simple prayers of thanks filled with love ascended from several, one after the other, as the others silently agreed with the heartfelt petition of each.

Warmth of affection for each other was evident in all their association as they remained in casual discussion for some time until they successively headed for their homes. Femi’s head was fairly swirling with all he had just experienced. It was all so new and different from anything he had ever known.

And he liked it. He liked it very well. His soul was refreshed and encouraged as no other gathering had ever done.

“Well, brother, how did you see our little meeting?” John inquired with a smile after the others had gone.

“It was wonderful! I’ve never seen anything like it. I was really blessed, and humbled. And the other brothers taught from the Scriptures like I’d never even read the passages before.

“Well, look, I’ve got many questions I want to discuss with you about it all, but it’s getting late. Maybe we can fix a time soon?” he concluded with a hopeful note.

“Sure, why not? Oh, speaking of discussing, didn’t you want to talk to me about something? It sounded pretty important.”

“Oh, yeah: I guess I do. I almost hate to after such a blessed time as this. Some ugly things are happening, John,” Femi reluctantly related with a grieved tone.

The encounter with Benson and Suki in the office was recounted in detail, both to unburden his own heart as well as to seek advice on what to do. John listened without interruption in somber silence to the sordid tale. A thick cloud of sorrow mingled with indignation hung heavily upon the two, alone in the parlor.

Several revolutions of the clock’s persistent second hand passed before John spoke. “I’m not surprised, brother,” was his simple comment.

Shock would best express Femi's reaction to this unexpected response. "Wha...What do you mean, not surprised? You mean you've seen something similar?" Femi inquired incredulously.

"No, I've not witnessed firsthand what you have," John was speaking cautiously and purposefully, looking him straight in the eye. "But I have suspected it for some time," he added, studying what effect this had upon his friend.

"But what made you think so? I mean, I work with him as close as anyone..."

"Anyone except Suki," John injected mid-sentence with a note of scorn.

"I guess you're right. But, how did you know? Femi was perplexed.

"One thing motivates the man, the love of money. I think you've seen that much?" John paused while Femi shrugged an acknowledgment of agreement. "And what does the Scripture call the love of money?"

"The root of all evil."

"Exactly. If you are longing after money, you will do virtually anything in the pursuit of it. Doesn't the passage say that a man falls into temptation, a snare, and many foolish and harmful lusts when he wants to gain riches?"

"It's true."

"That's why I'm not surprised. His love of money has plunged him into other lusts as the Word of God says it always will."

"But, I never expected that a Man of God of his stature would do such a thing. I mean, he's the president and founder of a very large ministry."

"So was Caiaphas. He was a lover of money and he crucified the Son of God! So why is this amazing to you, other than you had the unpleasant experience of encountering his sin right in the act?" John drove home the point with insistence and disgust over the whole affair.

Then, softening his tone he added, "I'm sorry, brother, that this has happened. You did well in what you said to both of them. Perhaps the Lord will lead them to repentance," then as an afterthought, "but it's not likely."

Femi let this sink in for a while, pondering what he should do further, if anything, in the situation. "What should we... I...what should be done now?" He was truly at a loss.

Calmly John quietly replied, "Prepare to suffer persecution for the sake of righteousness."

9

"I'm pregnant."

Only the clatter of his gold-plated pen upon the glass topped desk broke the tense silence in the Rev. Benson's office. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'I'm pregnant,'" Suki did not shift her gaze from the plush carpet pillowing her feet.

Protesting squeaks from the springs of his executive chair pierced the silence as he leaned back in panicked bewilderment. Cold beads of sweat dotted his upper lip. *This could finish me. Stupid useless woman, why did she have to go and do that?*

"I thought you said you were taking birth control pills," he finally burst out accusingly.

"They're not always 100% effective, you know," she shot back with irritation in her voice.

"Oh, great. Now look at the mess you've got us into!" he retorted with disgust.

"I didn't exactly get this way by myself, Benson, dear," her sarcasm bit him like salt in an open wound.

He bolted to his feet threateningly but caught himself before grabbing at her. He turned to pacing the floor behind the barrier of his massive desk, while Suki sulked hotly, returning a despising stare in his direction.

"Listen, Suki, if anyone finds out about this..."

"You and I both will be finished," she cut in contemptuously.

"Look, O, if you weren't so stupid as to get yourself pregnant..."

"Don't you call me 'stupid,' you old pig! I don't think anyone was holding a gun to your head every time you lay with me on this sofa!" she spat the words defiantly in his face.

Involuntarily tremors of rage shook his frame as his fists clenched and unclenched uncontrollably. Benson's feet started in her direction, the veins of his temples bulging in wrath, as his hand raised to strike her upon the face.

"If you dare touch me, I'll shout to everyone in this city how you impregnated me!" Suki screeched nearly hysterically.

As if encountering an invisible wall, he staggered backwards stunned at the realization of what he was about to do. The Rev. Dr. sank limply like a deflated balloon into his swivel chair and stared dumbly at Suki who was still poised for the conflict.

Lamb-like now, Benson covered his face in his hands. "Suki... I'm... I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. The news... it... it's so devastating. I guess I just lost control of myself..." his words had a hollow dazed tone to them.

She said nothing in reply but continued to watch him warily with even less respect than previously.

Finally, with a sense of being overwhelmed, he rather stupidly said, "So what are we going to do?"

The question was strategically left hanging by Suki to impress the point that he was in a dilemma for which he had no solution. When she sensed that his helplessness was at its highest ebb, she coldly stated, "We abort the thing."

He started up at this as if jolted by an electric current. "Abort? That's... that's rather drastic, isn't it?" his eyes were pleading that there might be some other avenue to resolve their disastrous difficulty.

Suki looked down upon his now pathetic form, weak and spineless in her calculating estimation. "Do you have any better solution?" she asked with a note of haughtiness still lingering in her voice.

He only slowly shook his head. Too much was at stake to spare an unborn fetus. He reluctantly conceded to the suggestion with a heavy sigh of defeated resignation. "But how can we do it? Everyone knows me, and your CDs and photos are all over Nigeria!"

“There’s one doctor in Lagos who specializes in secret abortions. You’d be shocked at the prominent women of fame who’ve been to him. I’ve talked to many of them myself,” she was in control of the situation once again.

“I’m sure he doesn’t offer his services for free,” Benson remarked, always keen when it came to the subject of money.

“It’s only ₦ 2.5 million,” Suki dropped the sum matter-of-factly, knowing that he would be aghast at the figure.

“₦ 2.5 million? How could any simple medical procedure amount to that?” he spluttered in disbelief.

“We’re not paying for medical expertise, we’re paying for silence. Reputations are expensive commodities, aren’t they?” she added, knowing that he had no alternative but to comply.

Suki understood him all too well. To his twisted and crooked heart, no other option existed. He was willing to pay a price of blackmail to conceal his lustful crime even though murder was the means of camouflage.

He faltered but briefly, convinced that there was nothing else to be done except this desperate plan. The kingdom he had erected was toppling and he would do anything to preserve it. Yes, anything at all.

“Okay, I don’t see any other way out. When will you do it?” he had already resigned himself to what he believed to be inevitable.

“I can leave for Lagos today and return on Saturday so I won’t be missed on Sunday. People might start to ask embarrassing questions if they don’t see me in the service, don’t you think?” she asked it with a slight challenge in her voice.

Is this crazy woman going to talk? Fear had gripped his cold heart at the prospect. I’d better not provoke her. She could ruin everything I’ve worked for during all these years.

“Your plan is a good one and I’m sure everything will work out fine,” he hastily stuttered. “Let me just access the safe under my desk and I’ll bring you the money,” yet Benson hesitated as if uneasy about something.

“Are you sure you can trust that Doctor not to speak one word of this to anyone?” he anxiously inquired.

“Are you sure you can trust anyone?” was her only half-mocking reply.

Actually, he was beginning to wonder. Suki had seemed so trustworthy and loyal before: before the beginning of their adulterous scandal. Now he was questioning that himself. It was a very unsettling feeling, but he was trapped and he knew it.

“Here’s the money. What you do, do quickly. Phone me when you get back in town.”

Without a further word she slipped the bundles into her waiting purse and proceeded out of the office door, not even looking back as she left.

~

I’ve got to move quickly to bring her under my control. This is already out of hand. How to get rid of my wife is the big problem now. As soon as she’s out of the way, Suki will be mine, both her body and her money, and with no more threats of exposing any secrets.

I know what to do! I’ll convince the other pastors that my wife is bewitched. Yes! That’s it! They will all turn against her then and I’ll come out of it shining as a humble suffering hero. O, it will work! It will surely work!

~

“Good afternoon, Sister Suki, we are so happy to see you. You are highly welcome! Please, have your seat,” was the overly cordial greeting lavished by the proprietor of Victoria Estates. “Quickly, bring our distinguished guest cold bottles of Eva for her selection,” he turned and smiled at Suki who was thoroughly at home in the plush surroundings.

“I think you know the purpose of my visit to your fine establishment this afternoon. I trust that all is in order so we can proceed and conclude the matter?” she inquired, expecting nothing less in reply.

“Certainly, Ma’am, all is in order. We’ve been anticipating your arrival and there is no problem at all in obtaining exactly what you’ve come for,” was the eager reply as a chilled crystal wine glass was set before her and she made her selection.

Suki sipped slowly at the drink in the luxurious reception room before casually remarking, “I have the ₦ 2.5 million with me, if you’d like to bring out the agreement for signature.”

Immediately the proprietor's assistant disappeared into an inner office, returning momentarily with the requested documents. Suki leafed through them to insure that all particulars had been addressed appropriately. Being satisfied, she affixed her signature to the papers and handed over the money.

“Very fine, Ma’am, we are quite honored to have you as our client, indeed. Your down payment this afternoon will assure the timely completion of your project within the next three months, all in strictest confidence, of course.”

“You’re well done, Sir. I think that the shipment of Italian marble for the entry way will soon arrive so as to not delay the completion of my condominium. Am I correct?” Suki asked only to make the point that she didn’t want any hitches in occupying the newly constructed luxury condo along the exclusive stretch of Victoria Estates.

“Certainly, everything is moving along according to schedule with no problems, no problems at all. All details will be completed according to your specifications well within the allotted time,” the proprietor gave all assurances that it would be so.

“I’ll pay you a visit next month to check on your progress,” and then, as if including him in a deep secret, she added, “and don’t spoil my surprise by letting anyone know about my purchase until after I move in; Agreed?” she had moved very close to him, employing all of her charm in the entreaty.

It worked. The silly man joined in the clandestine affair like he was guarding some sacred mystery entrusted to him by a priestess queen. “My lips are sealed, and my staff are all under the strictest of orders according to your request. You can rest assured, not a soul will discover anything through this establishment, that I guarantee.”

Suki gave him a teasing sensual smile. “It’s a pleasure doing business with someone like you, my dear Sir.” And, with that, she collected her copies of the real estate transaction and headed for her hotel suite in order to wile away the time until her return on Saturday.

Huh! Pregnant indeed. What kind of fool does he think I am, anyway? I would never be so careless as to become pregnant by him or anyone else. There’s too much at stake to allow that to happen.

He’s really a stupid man, giving me ₦ 2.5 million for a pretended abortion. Well, that’s his problem if he’s that foolish. I’ve got what I want, at least for now. I’ll soon be in my new condo, and all paid for by the Rev. Dr. himself. He really doesn’t know who he’s dealing with. No, he doesn’t know at all.

10

“How was the meeting, dear,” Blessed asked almost routinely, expecting nothing more than an offhand, ‘Oh, it was fine,’ response. She wasn’t prepared for what followed.

With an enthusiasm about church matters rarely witnessed in her husband, he eagerly drew her to his side as he began to relate all he experienced there. She listened with a growing interest and a strange warmth welled up in her heart, akin to a longing.

“It sounds, well, simply wonderful, Femi,” she was having trouble trying to envision all he had described. “Do they meet together often?”

“Every week, usually on Sunday afternoon so as not to compete with other church services,” he was watching her closely and observed her favorable impression. “Maybe we’ll go together next time, eh?” he added hopefully.

Her eyes met his with a tender seriousness, “I think I’d like that very much.”

~

“It was all so new, I mean it was very fine-O, but different in a wonderful kind of way. I can’t really explain it, but I’ve got a lot of questions for you,” the early morning sessions at the cloth-shop were becoming a regular event.

John laughed at Femi’s exuberance. “Okay, my friend, enter and ask away! Then let’s see what the Word of God has to say about all these things,” as he took his hand, leading the way to their familiar benches.

“Uh, I hardly know where to begin. I want to know about pastors and leadership and why there’s no pre-arranged program and how the brethren know what to teach and when to begin and which songs are to be sung and...”

“Slow down, brother, one thing at a time,” John chuckled with a broad grin, “just wait small and we’ll look at first things first.”

Femi was only a little bit embarrassed at his eagerness but smiled back, “Okay, so where do we begin?”

“At the beginning, where else?” John quipped. “Let’s look at the first mention of the church in the Scriptures found in Matt.16. I think we’ll discover there the foundational principles upon which everything else is built. Go ahead and read verses 13-18.”

Femi scanned the text then looked up, “Okay, I’ve read it.”

“Several things are to be noted here. First, no one can become a member of this church unless the Father in heaven reveals to one’s heart who Jesus truly is. It is a supernatural work to make Him known as the Christ.”

“But doesn’t every Christian believe that?”

“Not necessarily. Some in Jesus’ day thought He was someone other than He truly was: a prophet or miracle worker, but not the Christ, the Son of the living God. If you believe in an imaginary Jesus, you will never be blessed because an imaginary Savior doesn’t exist in reality, only in your own mind.”

“So what is the significance of Him being the Christ and the Son?”

“‘Christ’ is the New Testament word for ‘Messiah’ in the Old Testament. Both terms mean the same thing: Anointed. Now in the OT, it was the priest and the king who were especially anointed by God. The priest was the only valid mediator between God and men and the king was the only legitimate ruler over the people of God.

“In confessing Jesus as the Christ a person is saying, in effect, ‘I recognize no other means of acceptance before God and that no one else will govern and rule my heart except Jesus alone.’ I think you’re getting me?”

“You’re saying that nothing else will make a person a member of the church but this revelation of the true Jesus by God Himself. If a person is trusting in anything else to commend himself to God, or if anyone or anything besides Him is directing and ruling his life, he is not a true Christian at all. I think I’m right, eh?” Femi wanted to see if he’d really grabbed what John was saying.

“You’ve got it. Now, let’s see what Jesus says about the church in verse 18. Whose church is it?”

“Jesus says that it’s ‘My church.’”

“If it belongs to Him, then who does the church not belong to?”

“Well, it doesn’t belong to anybody but Him.”

“Not to any President and Founder? Not to any denomination? Is that right?”

“No, it couldn’t possibly belong to any of them or it wouldn’t be Jesus’ church again. That’s pretty basic, but what does that say about what’s going on in Nigeria? Everyone claims ‘This is my church,’ ‘This is my ministry.’ What is really happening?”

“You’ve seen something, brother. Let’s address that one a little later when we discuss leadership. But I want us to consider something else from verse 18 before moving on. How will Jesus’ church be built?”

“Why, He says that He will build it.”

“Does the Lord build with wood and cement? Have you ever seen a signboard saying, ‘This is the church that Jesus built?’”

“Of course not, that would be absolute foolishness.”

“Then the church that Jesus builds, the one he calls ‘My church,’ is not an earthly physical structure or institution. It is not identifiable by any building nor does it exist in any one denomination or organization. His church is completely other than the religious empires of men.”

“It’s true, though I’d never really thought of it that way before. It’s a spiritual thing, not like a business or corporation. But if it’s not like those things, what is the church?”

“The church is never actually defined in so many words in the Scriptures, but it is described by several illustrations. In those we learn what Jesus’ church really is.

“We believers are all brothers because we belong to one family with God as our Father. Jesus told us this in places like Mt.23:7-10. Verse 8 says, ‘you are all brothers.’ It’s why the Lord has the brethren in His church refuse all carnal titles of religious distinction.

“A second description is that of the Shepherd and His flock. The church is made up of sheep that all follow the voice of their one Shepherd, the Lord Jesus.”

“Isn’t that found somewhere in John’s gospel, maybe chapter 10 or so?” Femi was already searching his own Bible. “Yeah, here it is, Jn.10:1-16. Listen to this, ‘The sheep follow Him because they know His voice. A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him...and they will become one flock with one Shepherd.’

“Why is it then that so many are running after men who teach and practice such funny things? And why do we see churches scattered everywhere competing for sheep when Jesus says that His church is ‘one flock’? It doesn’t seem right at all,” Femi concluded slowly shaking his head in amazement.

“It’s not right. Men have exalted themselves to occupy the position in the church which belongs to Christ alone. It has created chaos and made seekers of God into followers of men. It’s a great evil.

“If we turn to Eph.2:19-22 we discover that the church is a spiritual house, a temple actually, and the very dwelling of God through His Spirit. Femi, what is meant by calling the church a temple?”

“Well, the temple is where the people would worship God.”

“Good, what else?”

“It is a holy place where God was glorified and, if I remember rightly, I think that the glory of God shone there in some kind of light or fire. Is that right?”

“Exactly. It is also the place where sacrifices are offered to God and where men can learn from the Word of God. Now, summarize what it means for the church to be the temple of God.”

“You want me to tell you?”

“Why not?”

“Okay, I’ll try. The church should be a holy place for God to dwell in where He is glorified by His people offering up spiritual sacrifices to Him and proclaiming His Word to men. I think that’s it, eh? Did I leave anything out?”

“Well done-O. Only one correction: you said the church should be this - Is it or isn’t it?”

“Many churches aren’t like this at all. That’s why I said the church should be that way,” Femi paused here knowing that John was heading somewhere with his question, but he didn’t know quite where.

“Does Eph.2, where we read, say that this is what the church should be or that this is what it is? Do you see the difference?”

“Let me read it over again,” he studied the text carefully this time. “It seems to be saying that this is what the church is, not what it should be as, if it were merely challenging people to be something other than what they actually are at present.”

“That’s exactly what I Cor.3:16,17 tell us. Let me read it. ‘Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.’ I think you’re getting me?”

“Clearly. A holy temple is what Jesus’ church is not what it is hoping to be or what it claims to be.”

“You’ve got it. Now, what would you say about something that claimed it was the temple of God but was full of rubbish and filth, offered no acceptable sacrifices, taught other things besides the Word of God, had no evidence of the presence of God within it and was ruled by thieves and robbers?”

“Well, I’d say that it was not the temple of God at all regardless of what they may claim it to be.” Here Femi settled into a sober reflection on what he had just uttered. “If it’s not truly a temple, then it’s not the church at all: certainly not the church that Jesus is building,” he met John’s eyes with a light in his own as if a profound revelation had just entered his heart. And, indeed, it had.

“The church that Jesus is building is also described as a bride in places like Jn.3:29, 2 Cor.11:2,3, Eph.5:23-32, Rev.19:7-9; really the whole book of Song of Solomon teaches this..”

“Hey! Slow down. I’m not a recording gadget, you know! This poor hand of mine can’t write that fast,” Femi interjected half-teasingly.

“Sorry-O. This truth of the church is so liberating, I just get carried away when I talk about it. I’ll try to control myself, okay?” John grinned back at his friend. “Here are the references again.”

John went over the list as Femi noted each one in his jotter. “Got ‘em? All right, let’s look at the 2 Corinthians passage briefly.”

They turned together in their Bibles and Femi read, “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”

“Two primary things characterize a bride: purity and devotion. She doesn’t chase after other lovers but has affectionate devotion for one man alone. Who would want to marry a woman who wasn’t pure and devoted to her own husband?”

“Never!”

“A pure, devoted, and loving bride is what identifies the true church of Jesus Christ. Let me ask you this, does a bride need someone shouting in her face to make her love her bridegroom?”

Femi recoiled at the absurdity of the suggestion. "Of course not: if she didn't already love him, no amount of commanding, however loud and insistent it was, could ever make someone love someone else," he paused as his brow furrowed, deep in thought. "Shouting prayer-points in the bride's face is a pretty useless practice, isn't it?"

"I think so. The bride doesn't need any artificial stimulants to arouse her affection or to express her love to him. She knows what their mutual concerns are and can freely speak to her bridegroom about them at any time.

"So what would you think of a woman who said she was a bride to her husband but slept with other lovers every week? Could that one be called the bride of Christ?"

"Na-lie! She is a harlot, not a bride," Femi paused with a disgusted look on his face.

"Brother, this is deep, yet it's so simple and plain. I don't understand why I haven't seen it before now. Maybe I wasn't really willing to see it. That's probably it. I was seeking other things in the church but not really seeking the Lord Himself.

"It's an embarrassing and shameful thing to consider and to admit," Femi was more thinking out loud than speaking to John who was listening with thanks for the light which was pouring into his friend's heart.

"We thank God for all the light He grants us, whenever and however He chooses to reveal it. Praise the Lord," John expressed with quiet gratitude.

"Amen, amen," Femi softly replied with heartfelt reverence. "But I think that's not all, is it? Let's continue."

"No problem. The most frequently used illustration of what makes up the true church is that of servants/slaves. Real Christians are slaves of God. Turn to Rom.6:15-23 and let's read it together. Notice how many times the idea of slavery is mentioned."

Both read silently for some moments until Femi commented, "Cai! There are many-O. It's clear; either we're slaves of sin or slaves of God, but I'm not understanding verse 18. How can we be free by becoming a slave?"

"Obedience to God is the only freedom there is. Everything else is bondage. Jesus said, 'He who commits sin is the slave of sin...'"

"I understand," Femi interrupted, "where's that found?"

"Let's see, it's in John eight," John paused while scanning the chapter, "in...Here it is, verse 34."

"Good. Thanks, bro."

"Slaves are purchased possessions who have no independent rights. Their only concern is to know and obey the will of their master. It makes life very simple, and also makes it very clear who are slaves of God and who aren't."

"Yeah, it sure does. The man whose directives a servant performs shows who his real lord is," Femi snorted a little laugh. "Which kind of servant is it who says, 'This man is my lord,' but does the work of another master?"

"A wicked one, for sure. The members of Jesus' church serve Him as slaves do their own Master. If they don't, it only shows that they are servants of another man, but not of the Lord Jesus.

"There's one other relationship that tells us what Jesus' church is like," John continued, "it's what Paul often refers to as the body of Christ. Col.1:18 simply says, 'He is also head of the body, the church.'" Now, Femi what is a body?"

"A body?" Femi asked as if it ought to be obvious to anyone what a body is. "Well, you know, it's what we, I mean, our real selves, live in. We do many things through our bodies..." he paused as if uncertain what else to say. "I'm not sure I'm getting you very well."

"No, you're doing fine. The body is the dwelling place for the one who lives inside it. The body is the means of accomplishing what the man has purposed in his heart to do.

"Each member of the body has its own designed purpose to contribute to the benefit of all. The life of the head flows in every part without exception. I think you understand?"

"It's getting clearer, but continue."

"How does your hand know when to move?"

"Why, it just does whatever I want it to do."

"If your nose is scratching, why does your hand reach up to itch it?"

“Because I don’t like it to scratch, so I move my hand to relieve it, that’s all. What are you trying to say, John?”

“I’m coming. Does your nose command your hand to do what the nose wants?”

“It could never.”

“How then does the nose make its ‘request’ for itching known to the hand? Is it by demanding or begging the hand to come and do something for it?”

“I’m not sure exactly how it all works except that I know when my nose is scratching and when it isn’t. I guess somehow a kind of message reaches my head from the nose, but I still...”

“That’s right,” John cut him off in order to make his final point, “and then your head sends a message to your hand to come and help your nose,” was his triumphant conclusion.

Femi looked as if he half-way was following all of this, so John spelled it out for him directly.

“Look, brother, Christ is the Head of the church, His body. There is one body which is made up of many members. All Christians have the life of the Head, Christ, within them.

“Jesus, as the Head, directs and governs the activities of each of the members. Only the Head could possibly coordinate the body, the church, to accomplish His will without total chaos resulting.

“No member dictates to any other. The nose doesn’t rule over the hand, but each member makes its requests known unto the Head. And it is Christ who directs each member to carry out His purposes for the good and benefit of all. This is how the true church of Christ lives and functions.

“There’s no conflict when the Head governs His own body. All is harmonious, purposeful, and productive. In this way, the church becomes the true expression of its Head and He is glorified by it.”

“I understand. But I’m not clear about leadership. There doesn’t seem to be any place for leaders or pastors in the way you’ve been explaining it. And I’ve never heard of a church that didn’t have a pastor. I mean, pastors are biblical, aren’t they?”

“There’s no question that there are to be godly leaders in the church. The real question is: what type of leaders should they be? That’s what we need to carefully consider from the Scriptures.”

“So what are we waiting for? Let me see your legs moving, brother,” Femi teased in his eagerness.

“First you tell me to slow down, and now you’re rushing me. Which kind of man are you, anyway?” John jokingly demanded. They both laughed before settling down to their study.

“Jesus gives the basis of all true leadership in His church in Lk.22:25,26. Let me read it. ‘Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.”’” Several very obvious things are seen here.

“First, Jesus’ leaders are servants, not lords. They are small boys, not great men. Second, it is the men of the world that act like lords by exercising authority over those they consider to be under themselves.

“If anything is clear, it is that Jesus’ true leaders are not to be ‘big men,’ exercising authority over the ‘small boys’ in their churches. So, yes, there are definitely to be leaders in the true church, but nothing like the typical leaders we see in the churches today.”

“Wonderful! Ah-ah!” Femi shook his head in amazement. “Jesus Himself said, ‘But you are not to be like that.’ But this is exactly what we are like. What is happening? When did you ever see a Man of God acting like the junior in the compound or serving the congregation like a slave? Never!”

“Don’t shout too loudly, brother, I think that you’re a pastor yourself by profession, eh?” John reminded him half-teasingly but with a seriousness underlying his comment. John was not one to look at faces when it came to teaching the Word of God. He simply spoke the truth in love.

Femi looked embarrassed for a moment then humbly said, “You’re right, brother, I guess I don’t exactly have anything to boast about. Cai-O! this Word of God. It’s like a hammer,” and then, realizing that though he saw what a leader wasn’t, he still wasn’t clear on what he should be, he asked, “But what then is a true leader in the church?”

“He is two things: an example and a teacher, that’s all. He is not an administrator as if he was directing a corporation and he’s not a lord as if he were the ruler of an empire.”

“I don’t want to be a ‘doubting Thomas,’ but you’re going to have to show me in the Scriptures or I won’t believe until I put my finger on the print of the page,” Femi jokingly insisted.

“Well, Thomas eventually was convinced when he saw for himself, so there’s still hope for you,” John replied with a twinkle in his eye. “Paul said, ‘not that we lord it over your faith’ in 2 Cor.1:24. Peter said a similar thing in I Pet.5:3, ‘not lording it over those entrusted to you.’ Jesus, Paul, and Peter all agree; leaders are not lords.

“A true leader is a humble servant who is an example of godliness. Jesus Himself said, ‘I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you,’ John noticed Femi rapidly writing and added, “That’s in Jn.13:15.

“Paul told the Thessalonians that they should pay close attention to his manner of life while among them so that they might do the same. 2 Thess.3:7 says it like this, ‘For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you.’ Peter commands the elders of the church to not act like lords, but rather to be ‘examples to the flock.’”

“Reference?”

“Oh, sorry. I Pet.5:3.”

“Anyone who would be an overseer in the church – that’s what the NIV calls him, the KJV says, ‘bishop’ – ‘must be above reproach,’ and be a model example in his own home. I Tim.3:5 says, ‘If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?’ That first quote was from verse two of this same chapter.”

“I’m grateful, brother, it’s clear. But what is a leader’s ministry? I mean, what work is he actually to be doing if he’s not to be ruling? I’ve always thought that ruling was the whole purpose of being a leader, you know, to tell those under you what to do.”

“‘Pastor’ is only mentioned once in the entire NT, in Eph.4:11. In other places, this same word for ‘pastor’ is translated as ‘shepherd.’ It’s what a pastor is and what his work consists of.”

“So what is a shepherd to be doing? Isn’t he the ruler of the flock?”

“Only the Lord Jesus is called the Ruling Shepherd. In I Pet.5:4 He is named ‘The Chief Shepherd.’ If you remember, in Jn.10:16 Jesus said that there is ‘One Shepherd’ over His flock, and He is certainly that One. I Pet.2:25 calls the Lord Jesus, ‘the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.’ “There can only be one ruling shepherd of a flock.

“No man can serve two masters. Only one Bridegroom is the object of devotion and love in the heart of His bride. No other foundation for the temple of God has been laid except Jesus Christ.

“A single Master commands and governs His servants. And certainly no one has yet seen a body with more than one Head. Christ Jesus has first place in everything in His church.”

“I understand that Christ is to be the unrivaled Lord of His people, but why are leaders called shepherds, then? That one needs more explanation.”

“The work of a shepherd basically consists of two things; feeding and protecting the flock. It is how shepherding is consistently described in the Word of God. Let me read Jer.3:15 in my KJV.

“‘And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.’ Now, you read the same verse in your NIV.”

“Okay, here it is, ‘Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding.’

“What similarities and contrasts do you see from these two versions?”

“Well, one says ‘pastors’ and the other says ‘shepherds.’ It’s just like we were saying, that ‘pastors’ is just another way of saying ‘shepherds’.”

“That’s right. Anything again?”

“There’s also the exchange of the word ‘feed’ for ‘lead,’” Femi suddenly saw it. “Huh, the purpose of leading is to bring the flock to feed on the knowledge and understanding of God’s Word! That’s it, isn’t it?”

“It’s what the ministry of leading and shepherding is all about, brother.”

“So let me see if I’m on track with what it means to protect the flock. When a leader sees the wolf coming, like something entering to scatter the flock, maybe wicked practices or false teaching or something, then it is to be resisted or overcome by the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Is that the idea?” Femi asked hopefully but with assurance, for he sensed that the Lord was enlightening his heart.

John was beaming with gladness. “Exactly. You’ve really grabbed something, brother. This tells us what overseeing is all about. Mature godly men watch to see that the people of God are being fed by His Word and not ruined by false and hurtful things coming in. That’s all.”

“The Word of God is wonderful! It’s so simple and direct: no religious politics, striving for position and recognition. It’s only a loving concern that others not suffer, either from lack of the needs of this life or lack of the light of God from His Word,” Femi reflected on these new realizations. “Now that I think about it, it’s really what was happening in the meeting in your parlor.”

“We try to do all to the honor and glory of God according to His Word so that the people of God might be encouraged and blessed.”

“So when are you going to begin a church?”

“We already are the church.”

“Wha...” Femi didn’t voice his question, realizing the obvious answer already from their previous discussion. “But aren’t you going to put up a church building?”

“Why would we want to do that?”

“To have a place for the church to meet, of course,” Femi sounded puzzled at John’s question.

“Where did the NT church meet? Was it in church buildings or cathedrals?”

“I don’t remember ever reading about any church buildings or such in the Scriptures, now that you mention it. So, where did they meet?”

“In their homes, just like we’re doing. House churches are spoken of in several places in the NT. You can look at Rom.16:5, I Cor.16:19, Col.4:15, and Philemon 2,” John calmly replied.

“But what are you going to do when it grows too big for your parlor? Then you’ll look for a building, eh?”

“No, we’ll just meet in however many homes are needed to accommodate the brethren the Lord sends our way.”

Femi didn’t know what to say about that. He’d never thought of the church in this way before. But he had to admit, he experienced more real fellowship and genuine Christians there than he ever had at Christ’s Tabernacle.

“What’s on your mind, brother?”

“Oh, just thinking about the meeting in your house. I really liked it, not like anything I’d ever been to before.” Then a new consideration came to his mind. “Tell me about the sisters, I mean, I heard them praying, but none of them did any teaching: not like Tabernacle at all.”

“What do the Scriptures tell us about that, do you know?”

“Uh, I’ve heard people talk about Deborah, she was a prophetess in the OT, and something about everybody being one in Christ or something like that. But I guess I’ve just kind of done what everyone else has been doing without really thinking about it much,” he somewhat sheepishly replied.

“Read I Timothy 2:11,12 and tell me what you think.”

Femi thumbed through his pages and found the place. “‘A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man.’”

“What’s there to think? I don’t know what could be clearer than that! So why do the churches not do what the Bible says?”

“That’s a big question, brother. Jesus asked it Himself in Lk.6:46, ‘Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and do not do what I say?’ It certainly raises very serious issues about the genuineness of our profession, doesn’t it?”

“I’ll say,” Femi fell silent again, deep in thought. A look of admiration came across his face as he remarked, “I was really blessed and challenged by your love for brother Kunle and his family. It’s how giving should be, from the heart, out of real demonstrated love to meet pressing needs. God bless you all.”

John was deeply touched to think that their simple act of concern for their brother had such a testimony to the glory of God. “Thanks, brother, may the Lord be praised.”

They both fell silent for several minutes. A divine work of excavation had begun in the hidden recesses of Femi’s heart which was sending tremors under his former foundation.

But he didn’t recoil at the upheaval. He rather welcomed it, for his eyes were fixed on something far greater and more glorious. He had seen the light of God from His everlasting Word.

Abruptly Femi asked, “John, why are you at Christ’s Tabernacle?”

“It’s my mission field,” came the simple reply.

Femi glanced up at the unexpected answer only to nod as he realized what his friend had meant. “Thank God for your life, brother.”

“Femi,” John paused until he had his full attention, “neither one of us will last long in that place.”

He looked into John’s sober eyes steadily for some moments. “You’re absolutely right, brother. We won’t last long.”

11

“I have some very devastating and sorrowful news. It’s why I’ve called you all here for this special meeting,” the Rev. Dr. Benson had assembled all of his junior pastoral staff into his private chambers. “What I am about to say must be kept in the strictest confidence as the entire future of this divinely ordained ministry is hanging in the balance.”

Nervous glances were swiftly exchanged between themselves with strained attempts to keep their composure and mask their alarm. *What could possibly be wrong?* raced through each troubled mind.

“I think you all know what this is,” as he dramatically tossed an antelope horn filled with black soap onto his glittering desk top.

Gasps of horror were heard on many lips as the powerful Juju clattered to a silent halt inches from their side of the shiny surface.

“For some time now I have sensed in my spirit that means were being used against this anointed ministry. I have been fasting and praying that the Lord would expose those who are practicing these devilish works of darkness. Two days ago, the breakthrough came after mighty wrestlings with the prince of the kingdom of Persia,” the G.O.’s lowered volume heightened the already electric tension in the air.

“Unfortunately, what I have suspected for many months has been confirmed,” he was trying to control his contrived emotional upset. It was a convincing performance. Not a soul dared breathe as they awaited the unveiling of the devil’s agent in their midst.

With great emotion straining his voice, Benson choked out, “I discovered it in my wife’s wardrobe,” as he turned his head to the side in mock grief.

The effect was predictable. Tears involuntarily sprang from the women’s eyes, groans emitted from every throat, which were otherwise speechless, so shattering was the crushing blow.

No one dared to speak in the stunned silence which followed as they sympathized with their Founder’s convincing sorrowful display. After seemingly endless moments, he heaved a great sigh and quietly stated, “This will signal either the end of my marriage, or the end of my ministry,” he paused for emphasis. “And I’m not about to let the devil gain the victory over what God has ordained through this ministry,” he concluded as if he were a noble martyr pledged to the cause of righteousness.

“I regret deeply having to be the bearer of this terrible news, but it is for our good, each one of us, who are dedicated to this ministry. If we do nothing, God Himself will hold us responsible for not preserving what He has committed into our hands.

“I can only ask that you stand with me and do battle against the principalities that have taken hold of my wife, and that I might do what is required for the glory of God, painful as it will be. This is spiritual warfare of the first order and we must not shrink from the path of known duty. May the Lord help us, each one, in Jesus’ name,” he concluded with a pretended note of reverence.

They filed out, grieved and burdened, in full agreement with the Reverend’s proposal to divorce his bewitched wife. The evidence had been presented before their very eyes.

The Rev. Dr. had spoken. The anointing of God was upon him. What further proof did they need for the allegations?

Yet the Word of God still stands. “Go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” - Mt.18:15, 16.

None of them went to the Rev. Mrs. to confirm anything. That is never done. They only believed what they were told by the Man of God. His word settled all issues in their minds. But the Word of God did not.

They were really as foolish as the man who ruled them.

~

“How was the meeting, dear?” Blessed inquired cheerily as Femi entered the parlor.

Femi nearly whirled on his heel and faced his wife with a determined fire in his eye. “It was disgusting, totally disgusting,” he answered with great agitation.

Taken aback by his unexpected intensity, she stumbled against the small serving table, scattering it and its rubber plate onto the floor.

“Sorry, dear, I didn’t mean to upset you. It was just such a...a... I don’t even know what to call it; Sorry, sorry...” he rubbed his forehead with both hands as he sank into the sofa.

Blessed quickly joined him, her alarm being replaced by concern and comfort. “What happened? I can’t imagine what could have...”

Femi cut her off, not rudely, but in exasperation at what he had witnessed. “No, you could never imagine in your wildest dreams what just happened.”

Even more concerned than before, she patted his arm soothingly and quietly said, “Can you talk about it, I mean, do you want to talk about it?”

I’ve got to. I can’t conceal what I know about Benson and Suki any longer, not when he’s bent on such a desperate venture as divorcing his wife.

“Blessed, dear, have I ever lied to you?”

“Why, no, dear, never,” she hesitatingly managed to reply, even more confused and anxious now as she waited for what was coming.

“Then I want you to listen very carefully to what I’m going to say,” he turned to look her directly in the eye, “and you must not mention to anyone what you’ve heard.”

She swallowed hard, bewildered at his indignation, but nodded in agreement.

“The Rev. Dr. Benson is planning to divorce his wife because he says she is an agent of the devil sent to destroy his ministry,” he reported the gist of the meeting with cold accuracy.

“Whaaat? You can’t mean it? Divorce? Witchcraft? How can it be?” she faded into a stupefied silence, horror stricken at the prospects swirling in her mind. Femi said nothing to his wife’s questions but sat staring rigidly while drumming his fingertips on his knee.

“I don’t believe a word of it,” he at last broke into her mystified reflections.

“Whaaat?” she blurted out for the second time.

“I said, ‘I don’t believe a word of it.’”

“Femi, what are you saying? Are you saying that Rev. Benson is not telling the truth?” she asked incredulously.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” he turned again to gaze straight into her astonished eyes, “and I know why I’m saying so,” he ended with finality.

It was a big pill for his wife to swallow. She sat stunned while the wall clock ticked off some revolutions. Eventually she implored him with a quivering tone, “That’s a mighty serious accusation against a Man of God. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

He didn’t look at her but flatly said, “Do you want to know why I said so?”

She wasn’t sure that she did, but she knew she must. She couldn’t bear to allow the turmoil and tension within her to continue unresolved. “Femi, please, this is so upsetting. I don’t know what to say. I want to know, but I’m fearing what it might be. Please, help me decide. I...I trust your judgment,” she shakily replied in a tiny voice.

“Okay, it’s okay. I really want you to know what’s happening; you need to know. I wish it wasn’t so, but it is. It’s like a bad dream,” Femi sounded apologetic about what he was going to tell his dear wife.

“It’s been just over a week ago now when I went to the church office in the afternoon, actually, right before Mary left with Peter at noon for their lunch. As she was leaving, Mary said I should just knock and go on in to the Reverend’s office, that he and Suki were listening to some of her CDs, trying to decide which songs they wanted to use for the upcoming state wide vigil,” Femi could see that Blessed was attentive to his every word.

“So, I knocked like Mary told me to, but I didn’t hear a reply, maybe because the CD was playing so loudly. Anyway, I opened the door and entered,” a storm seemed to cloud his eyes with a threatening darkness as he spoke these last words.

“I couldn’t believe what I met when I stepped inside his office. There on his sofa were the Reverend, caressing and kissing Suki in a passionate embrace!” he almost spit out the last sordid details.

For the third time that evening, Blessed’s mouth gaped open in disbelief, “Whaaat? Femi, are you sure?”

“Listen, dear, of course I’m sure. I know it sounds incredible, that’s why I asked you beforehand if I had ever lied to you. The whole thing is sickening,” Femi finished with revulsion evident in his every fiber.

Before Blessed could collect her wits to comment, he continued, “That’s why I said that I don’t believe him. He’s only looking for a ‘spiritual’ sounding excuse to dump his wife so he can cover up his lust for Suki. It’s wickedness.”

Blessed’s earlier alarm had now turned to outright fright. *What has become of our G.O.? This will scatter our church. It will ruin us and my husband’s position as pastor. Oh, why is this happening? What can we do?*

“Please, Femi, be very careful about what you are saying, we shouldn’t ever speak against the Lord’s anointed. God isn’t happy with that, you know,” she weakly exhorted him, more out of fear of possibly losing his job than of anything else.

“And do you suppose that God is happy with adultery in His so-called anointed man?” Femi shot back contemptuously.

His wife felt her face blush with shame at the obvious answer to that question and she thought it best to pursue a different approach. "Didn't they have any explanation for what they were doing? Maybe it wasn't exactly as it first appeared," was her next cowardly suggestion.

Femi bristled with anger at that. "What kind of explanation will a married man give for fondling another woman with his hands inside her clothes while kissing her lustfully on the lips?"

Blessed looked as if someone had slapped her in the face.

"Suki only snarled at me with a hateful insult when I told her that a man should not touch a woman in any immoral way. And as for our dear Reverend," Femi added with extreme sarcasm, "why, he rushed at me like a wounded beast, knocked my Bible to the floor, and shook his threatening fist in my face while promising that I'd wish I had never been born if I dared to quote the Word of God to him again.

"That, my dear, was what first appeared to my eyes and the explanation they gave for their sin. I hope that answers your question," he concluded hotly.

There was nothing more to be said. The ugly secrets had been exposed and nothing remained but to grieve over the tragedy of shipwrecked lives.

A warm tear dropped onto his hand from his devastated wife's cheek. Femi tenderly gathered her into his arms as she wept silently on his shoulder.

"Please, dear, I'm sorry. I'm not angry at you, it's just this whole stinking mess. It rips at one's heart. May God help us . . . May God help us."

~

"You really do love me, don't you Benson, dear?" Suki had slid next to him on the executive sofa in the Reverend's office.

"Of course I do, what brings this up all of a sudden?"

"Oh, I'm not doubting it at all, especially when I see what you're willing to sacrifice to have me as the new Mrs. Benson," she leaned over and tickled his ear. "I can hardly wait for the day," she whispered and kissed him to emphasize her sincerity.

Benson's inflated Ego swelled his conceit and deepened his delusion. He imagined that his scheme was proceeding undetected and under his masterful control. His pride blinded him into thinking that Suki really loved him and was taken in by all his trickery. But pride never rightly assesses anything.

"When do you think we can be wedded? How long will the proceedings take in the courts for the divorce to be finalized? Oh, I hope it's not long," she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Don't worry your pretty head about it. Our glad day will take place within two months, God willing."

"Yes, God willing. I'm so happy! I'll be making every preparation for that blessed event. Oh, Benson, it's hard to believe that we'll soon be married!"

"Didn't I tell you, 'With God, all things are possible'?" he announced with smug self-congratulation.

"Yes, dear, you certainly did. All things are surely possible."

Benson smiled, thinking that he knew what she meant and that he had her exactly where he wanted her.

Nothing was further from the truth.

~

"There are some serious financial concerns facing us all at Christ's Tabernacle of Glory," the President swiveled from behind his monument of a desk to impress his point upon his junior pastoral staff at the Sunday morning pre-service briefing. "Tithes have been dropping and offerings have been tapering off. This trend must be reversed immediately," as he shifted his gaze accusingly in Femi's direction.

“Some of you have been displaying a lack of team spirit and even opposition to the divine principles that this anointed ministry has been built upon,” he let that sink in with one of his theatrical pauses. “And I’m not the only one who has witnessed such things.”

The stage was being set to dismiss pastor Femi from the church, and Benson was a master manipulator.

“I think, Pastors Emmanuel and Chide, that you have encountered this firsthand, have you not?”

It was Emmanuel who immediately spoke up, always alert for an opportunity to ingratiate himself in the Reverend’s eyes.

“Why, yes, Sir. We both were in this very office just before the city-wide vigil I believe,” he glanced at Chide for confirmation who nodded an affirmative, “when Pastor Femi entered and began contradicting the biblical message of Prosperity.”

“And what exactly took place at that time?” the G.O. was sounding like a circuit court judge.

“Well, he rebuked us for wanting to see many people come and be blessed by attending the vigil, saying that we were only interested in getting people’s money. He was very insistent with what he thought the Bible was saying and wouldn’t listen to reason at all.”

“I remember the instance as if it happened yesterday. Tell the staff what he said to me, the President and Founder of this ministry.”

These men are setting me up! He’s going to get rid of me because of him and Suki and pretend that I’m a rebel! I can’t believe it!

“It was most disgraceful, Sir. I’m even embarrassed to mention it, but I must for the benefit of this divinely appointed ministry.”

Spoken like a true Judas, betraying the innocent for filthy lucre.

“He reproved you, Sir, in our presence and did not hesitate to argue with you even after you had admonished and corrected him. He continued to quote verses out of context though you had warned him about the dangers of doing so. We were both shocked at the disrespect and rebellion we witnessed that day,” Emmanuel rounded up his speech of poison, hoping that he had served his master’s purpose well.

“All of you, and the entire congregation as well, were the unfortunate witnesses to Femi’s misled ramblings about giving during our morning service recently. This was a purely rebellious act which had no approval or sanction from the General Overseer and was done in violation of the sacred pledge he made upon entering this ministry as a junior pastor. I believe that you signed an agreement to uphold all the divinely inspired principles that this ministry is founded upon when you took the position. Isn’t that correct, Pastor Femi?”

“It’s true, Sir.”

“Well, what you were saying had no resemblance to the sacred vow you bound yourself under when called of God to this position. We can only assume that you are going astray and attempting to lead others into your same path of delusion.

“Sister Suki, I believe that you were present just over a week ago when Femi burst into my office uninvited and began rebuking me, waving his Bible around as if he were John the Baptist standing before Herod. Is that so?”

“It was a very shameful display, most unbecoming, disrespectful, and willfully rebellious. His arrogance in thinking he could address an anointed Man of God like you, Sir, in the manner in which he did, cannot even bear repeating. I was shocked at the outrage and happy at the mature way you dealt with his waywardness,” Suki’s smooth tongue would convince even the most skeptical.

Femi had grown almost numb from the barrage of boldfaced lies heaped one upon the other. But in the midst of it all, a breath of freshness from the Spirit of God enlivened his soul, “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” -Mt.5:11,12.

John leaned over and whispered into his wife, Priscilla's, ear, "Let's pray right now for brother Femi. I have a real burden that we should ask the Lord to strengthen him to stand firm at this very hour." And so, seated in the sanctuary before the morning service began, they raised their petition of love earnestly to the Father in heaven.

~

"Pastor Femi, you have repeatedly gone astray over the past months even though you have been lovingly corrected by your fellow ministers and by your General Overseer. We can only hope and pray that these things will be sufficient for you to see the error of your ways and return to a true Christian faith and practice.

"We are willing to provide you one last opportunity to display your loyalty and commitment to God and to this ministry. The blessing of the people of God has suffered by your discouraging influence to turn them away from their divinely mandated responsibility to bring the whole tithe into this storehouse.

"This chance is being presented to you this morning. It will be your privilege and responsibility to warn the people of the certain curse of God upon them if they fail to tithe in obedience to the Word of God. Will you accept this command from the President and Founder of this ministry and thereby show your repentance for your former actions and teachings?"

All eyes were upon him as they waited with bated breath for his reply.

"With good conscience before God I could not do such a thing, Sir, as I do not believe that God sends His curse upon His true people, and especially not for failing to tithe as you have indicated. So, I must respectfully refuse your offer, choosing to obey God rather than men."

Benson was elated, though he was careful to display a somber exterior as if he were deeply grieved. He allowed a strategic silence to follow Femi's words, knowing that no one would dare speak until he did.

Slowly, and with great solemnity, he rose from his seat and faced them all, fixing his gaze on Femi. "Pastor Femi, I am truly saddened to hear your response. It displays a root of willfulness which will not yield to sound reason, the Word of God, or to the voice of your divinely sanctioned authority in this ministry.

"I can see no alternative but to regretfully dismiss you from your post as Pastor in this congregation. Are we in agreement?" the question was thrown out to all assembled, knowing full well that none would dare disagree with his decision.

"Yes, Sir, the testimony is clear and has been demonstrated by repeated specific instances and witnesses," it was the sniveling self-seeking Emmanuel again.

"I'm afraid so, Sir, there is no evidence of his willingness to turn from his strange notions," Chide chimed in his echo of Emmanuel's assessment.

"To keep him on would only further oppose what God is doing through this ministry. It would only be a threat to realizing our divine potential," these were "sweet" Suki's comments.

Yeah, it would be a threat all right: A threat to expose your lustful secret crimes.

"Are we all in agreement, then?" Benson was carefully monitoring each person's response.

They all nodded their ascent, Peter being the last to comply. He was troubled by the proceedings, but was not a strong man. He was accustomed to being compliant and not causing problems when others insisted on their way.

Neither was he one to ask questions, but rather did what he was told. And it was clear that the Rev. Dr. was convinced that this was the needful course of action. So, he cast in his vote with reluctance, not knowing what else to do in the circumstance.

"Pastor Femi, you will drop your keys with Mary as you leave. We will announce to the congregation this morning what has transpired here. You are free to go now," it was spoken as a master would to his slave.

~

“Femi, what’s wrong, you don’t look well?” Blessed noticed him mechanically making his way down the side aisle of the church complex.

“I’ll tell you all about it at home. I think I’ll go ahead now and try and rest some. Bye,” he listlessly moved on out of the building into the street.

Oh God, has it happened? Has what I’ve been fearing really taken place? O, Lord, have mercy, have mercy, O, Lord!



“That was some pretty fancy dribbling in there, Rev., dear,” Suki flattered him with oily admiration. “A most convincing set-up: I’m impressed.”

“I told you I knew how to handle him, didn’t I?” he boasted overconfidently.

“That you did, dear, that you did,” Suki mused thoughtfully.

This man may be more crafty than I have imagined. I will need to very carefully maneuver the events of these next few weeks.

12

It was with silent emptiness that the parlor welcomed the weary former pastor as Femi snapped open the entry padlock. It was actually a relief to be alone, away from the noise and treachery he had just now left at Christ’s Tabernacle of Glory.

Not bitterly, he entered what seemed to him a sanctum from the strife and deception he had been in the midst of only minutes before. Harassed as he was, an inexplicable peace guarded his heart from bursting out in vengeance.

Instinctively, he sank to his knees in the cool dim solitude.

“Father, I truly give You thanks. You certainly cause all things to work together for good to those who love You and are called according to Your purpose. Surely it was Your purpose for me to encounter these things.

“You permitted me to discover the secret wickedness of Suki and the Reverend. You gave me grace and boldness to speak Your truth in love to both of them. And You have counted me worthy of suffering for Your name’s sake.

“John suffered at the hands of Herod and Your own Son suffered under Pontius Pilate, all according to Your blessed will. And shall I suffer the less for the cause of righteousness?”

“No, Lord, it could never be, for the Lord Jesus told us that if they hated Him, they will also hate us. And who am I but a weak and unworthy servant? Jesus alone served You well.

“Unworthy as I am, I must surely taste of the fellowship of His sufferings. I do so long to live godly in Christ Jesus, and You have granted me the grace and privilege to be persecuted in Your great cause. Blessed be Your Name!

“Lord, I bow my heart before You. You alone are worthy. Your ways are past finding out and Your will is good, acceptable, and perfect. I rejoice this day in what You have strengthened me to endure.

“I do not know what Your purpose is in all of this that has come upon me. But I do know this, that You will never leave me or forsake me, according to the unchanging promise of Your everlasting Word.

“Look upon me still, blessed Savior, and do not abandon me to my foes, for my eyes are fixed upon You. My help comes from the Lord, who has made heaven and earth. Hear my prayer and act for the sake of Your great Name that I might praise you from this time forth and forevermore. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”



“Bomp-bomp-bomp-bomp!” rocked the pounding drums, booming bass, and screaming keyboard as Suki and her singers gyrated and bounced to the rhythm. Hundreds of prancing worshipers gleefully surged the aisles with their offerings. The sermon had rounded up, which immediately launched Suki into her Sunday morning melodic fund-raising ritual.

Femi’s announcement had been carefully reserved until after the moneys were collected. It was a prudent financial decision on the part of the G.O. This most critical portion of the service having been completed, Benson had directed Suki to conclude with a slow and moving worship solo.

With her final subdued but emotionally charged notes still lingering, the Rev. Dr. mounted the pulpit and solemnly, almost reverently, led the congregation in prayer. The atmosphere was now set to spring the news.

“It is with great heaviness of heart this morning that I am standing here before you.” Not even a baby whimpered in the suspenseful silence that ensued across the auditorium.

“There are times in every great move of the Holy Ghost when trusted fellow ministers loose the divine vision imparted to God’s ordained man,” he shifted his gaze down as if in great turmoil.

“Over the past months, one of our very own pastors has repeatedly shown a departure from the heavenly vision this anointed ministry has been founded upon,” he allowed that to impress them thoroughly before continuing.

“After several instances involving myself, your President and Founder, as well as numerous of the loyal pastors of Christ’s Tabernacle of Glory, we, as a Spirit-led ministry team, have regretfully discovered that one among us has departed from the faith which has been delivered to us by the anointing that is upon me.

“The pastor referred to has refused to listen to loving correction, has actually rebuked and insulted me in the presence of others on our ministry team, and has undermined with false teaching the divine principles of the Word of God which we all hold dear.

“Things climaxed this morning when he boldly refused to perform his usual duties of service though exhorted to do so at the direction of your General Overseer. He declared in the presence of all the pastoral staff that he could not violate his conscience by obeying men rather than following his new-found misled notions of ministry.

“We, your anointed pastors, have often corrected and reproved his false ideas, but all to no avail. He has stubbornly and rebelliously continued in his false concepts and refuses to abandon his undermining of this ministry.

“It is therefore with great grief that I, in behalf of the entire pastoral staff, must announce to you the dismissal of Pastor Femi from his position and responsibilities in this church.

“Let us commit him and the family into the hands of God that they might see the error of their ways and return to the blessed path they once had walked upon. Let us pray...”

~

O God, how can this be? I can't believe it! I've never been so devastated in my life. How can I look anyone in the eye? I'm so humiliated. How will we ever be normal again? What will we do now to feed? I feel sick.

I just want to get away. Hundreds of people are watching me. I feel so unclean, like a leper. Why did he say 'they' might see the error of 'their' ways? Does he think that I don't believe in Prosperity and that I'm rebellious too? It's not true! I want to get rich but now everything is ruined.

Oh Femi, why did you have to go and do this? Why me? O God, why me? It's just not fair! Blessed quickly gathered the children, gazing at no one in her flight from the now seeming hostile sanctuary.

~

“Well I would have never guessed that such a fine young man as Pastor Femi could go so far astray. It is truly a pity, a pity indeed,” Mary confided in her husband's ear. “And what of his dear wife and children? Oh! how embarrassing, such a public scandal as this.

“I feel sorry for the poor dear,” then interrupting herself she added, “though the Reverend did say that they needed to turn from their errors. Well, I imagine that they're both in this together, then.”

“I...I'm not so sure, my dear, that they're as bad as everything appears,” Peter nervously ventured to soften his wife's hasty and uncharitable conclusion.

“Why, whatever do you mean by that? Of course they are guilty and rebellious; the Reverend himself said so, all the pastors know it to be true, and didn't you agree yourself that it was so?” she buried him with her rapid-fire barrage of reasons. “So it's plain to everyone, including you, that he's gone astray and deserves his punishment.

“Huh! Daring to talk back to a Man of God! It only goes to show that he's reaping what he's sown,” and, with that, she dismissed any further comments on the subject. Peter knew that her mind was made up, so he settled back into his customary submissive silence once again.

~

“Well, it's finally happened. It was only a matter of time. Femi's spiritual progress and his stand for the truth of the Word of God has been shaking Benson's foundation of sand for some time now,” John whispered earnestly to Priscilla following the announcement. “Catching them in their secret sin was the final straw for him. All the accusations against Femi are pure rubbish,” he concluded with distaste.

“Poor Blessed. What must she be going through? She's not as spiritually strong as Femi has become. We must uphold them both in prayer and I'll go by and greet her in the house this week,” she softly replied in her husband's ear.

~

Stupid fool! He's thrown away every possibility of ever being recognized as a big Man of God. Go ahead, Femi, read your little Bible. As for me, I'll press on to get what really matters, my own ministry where Prosperity will be all mine. Pastor Emmanuel had been trained all too well by his mentor, the Rev. Dr. Benson.



No one even considered whether the news about Femi was true or not. There was no need to. The anointed Set Man, God's very mouth piece had spoken. It was all that they cared to know.

To them, it did not matter that Mt.18:15-17 condemned their hasty and foolish acceptance of whatever their General Overseer decreed. Their only concern was to be rightly aligned with the Man of God. To be otherwise was certain spiritual suicide.

God had spoken His living word of Rhema through His chosen vessel. It was as if God Himself had declared His mind infallibly and unquestionably through the mouth of the Rev. Dr. They thereby simply followed whatever they were told like so many senseless sheep.

For them, the word of man had replaced the Word of God. But the tongue of this man was the venom of a viper, and he had injected its deadly poison into their very heart and soul.



"Welcome, Dear," Femi greeted his tense and distraught wife as she hurried past him without a word.

Lord, give my wife grace to endure all things for the sake of the gospel. May she not be ashamed to bear reproach for the testimony of Your Word. Help us, Lord; we are looking to You alone for wisdom. May these evils which have come upon us at Christ's Tabernacle not cause her to stumble from Your way. Please, hear my request in Jesus' name. Amen.

After settling the children she returned to face him in the parlor. "Femi, I can't believe what I heard this morning! How could you do this? Have you gone mad? What about me and the children? Did you ever think about that?" she was more than upset, she was frantic.

"Blessed, dear, the best I can do for you and the children is to faithfully obey the Word of God without fear," was his calm and gentle reply.

"I suppose you mean that being thrown out of your job in public disgrace is the best you can do?" she spitefully retorted.

"I'm sorry that we've had to suffer this injustice at the hands of deceivers, but you know that what they said is not true, don't you?" he asked sincerely, not accusingly or defensively, but purposefully to help her to see clearly the reality of their situation.

Her folded arms, flexing jaw muscles, and stiff posture showed that his point had been made though she wasn't happy that it had been. Frustration was written all over her face as her eyes shifted rapidly in her distress.

Femi continued since Blessed made no reply. "You know that Benson and Suki's sin along with their love of money is at the root of what happened this morning." It was a statement of fact, not a question.

Blessed turned her back on her husband who was seated on the sofa. He sensed that she realized it was true, but also that she was angry because it was. Without turning around she said with determination, "Listen, I'm not ready to abandon Prosperity as easily as you have. We need a breakthrough now more than ever and I'm going to pursue it whether you do or not!"

"Dear," Femi gently replied, "you know that the Scripture warns us that those who long for riches wander away from the faith: like Benson and Suki. I don't think you wish to end up like them."

Hot tears burst from her troubled eyes. "No! I don't want to end up like that, but I don't want to end up like this either! Oh, why...why...why? Why has God done this to us?" and she broke down sobbing uncontrollably.

Femi rose and placed a comforting arm on his wife's shoulder. She did not resist. "We're in the hands of God, dear. I don't know why this is happening. I don't really know," was all that he could think of to say.

But it was enough. In the hands of Him who does all things well is the best place for anyone to be. God makes no mistakes. Though clouded over to their sight now, they would soon learn to

say with Joseph of old, “You meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result” - Gen.50:20.

At the moment, however, that song was not on either of their lips.

~

“Shall we have a little farewell celebration in memory of the late Pastor Femi?” came the mocking invitation from Sister Suki, sipping at an imported beverage in Benson’s chambers.

“Huh!” grunted Benson in disdainful amusement, “Why not? He’s surely gone and buried by now, and I don’t expect that he’ll be resurrected any time soon, if ever,” he forced a scornful grin and clinked his own glass against hers to toast the event.

“Now that Mr. Big-mouth is out of our hair, nothing will stand in the way of realizing our dreams. The upcoming state- wide vigil will be a very critical turning point in this ministry,” he paused and slid closer to her, “and in our own lives together,” he added with exaggerated desire.

“You’re not holding secrets from me, are you Benson, dear,” she batted her eyes at him teasingly. “How will the time of the vigil be a turning point for us?”

He smiled knowingly, liking the sense of being in control of a situation. “The divorce proceedings are well underway and should be rounding up just about at that time. And then,” he placed his arm around her, “you shall become Mrs. Benson.”

Suki gazed longingly into his eyes, “There’s nothing I look forward to more than that time.”

~

I’ve really got her convinced. She wants to be my wife. Soon she’ll be all mine with no more worry about her spoiling my plans. You’ve done all right for yourself, Benson.

~

Everything must be completed before that vigil or all I’ve been working for up to now will be totally scattered. And I’ll need all my cunning and charm to make that happen before it’s too late.

13

“My brother, sorry-O,” John consoled Femi the next day.

“Thanks, John, I’m really very grateful. You’re friendship has been a real blessing to me.”

“It’s not easy, what you’re passing through, but the Lord Himself will strengthen you to endure all things. God’s Word is true and to be trusted though every man be a liar. He will never

fail or forsake you regardless of the evils of men. Ps.119:161 puts it this way, 'Rulers persecute me without cause, but my heart trembles at Your word.'

"The Lord is faithful, John. I'm actually kind of relieved about the whole thing. My spirit has been grieved for how many long months now? I'm thinking that this whole thing is really a blessing in disguise though I couldn't tell you how."

"Job didn't understand his sufferings while in the midst of them all, yet the Scriptures tell us in Job 1:22 that, 'In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.'"

"That's encouraging, brother. I sure wish that the Lord would open Blessed's heart to see it that way," Femi longed for wistfully.

"This whole thing is hitting her pretty hard, eh?" John inquired with true concern.

"I'll say! She's so upset and confused, not to mention embarrassed! She's really at her wit's end about how we're going to feed now that there's nothing forthcoming from the church again. I guess I don't really know myself," he added honestly with a twinge of perplexity.

"Listen, Femi, the Lord Jesus will use all of these things for His own glory and for all of our spiritual blessing. I think you know Rom.8:28, eh?"

"Yeah, very well, and not just in my head, either. I seem to be living out the reality of it, day by day!"

"We thank the Lord that He's kept your eyes fixed upon Him. He'll continue to lead you and supply all of your needs," John encouraged him and then paused in serious reflection, as if studying his friend.

Femi glanced up and noticed John's intent contemplation. "What are you thinking about so hard over there?" Femi's curiosity gave expression to his question.

As if arriving at a conclusion, John replied, "For some time now I've been praying about someone to assist me in the shop. Not just anyone though. He would have to be a man of integrity, able to be trusted, and honest in all things," he fell silent briefly and studied his friend again.

"I've not been comfortable with any of the people I've been considering. I really need someone who's diligent, and especially one who loves people rather than money. Those are all rare qualities to be found in our day and age."

"Well, maybe I can join you in praying that the Lord will send you the right person." Femi had not caught on why John was bringing this up at that time.

"Maybe the Lord has already answered that prayer, brother," John's smile was directed straight at Femi's puzzled face.

"He has? How...I mean, wha...what are you trying to say?" Femi was baffled, then suddenly embarrassed. "You...you're not talking about me, are you?" he inquired with disbelief.

John laughed. "Sure, why not? You've proven yourself through all the wahalah of these past months to be a perfectly suited assistant. So, my brother," John smiled broadly at Femi's astonished face, "you want a job?"

~

"Blessed!" Femi burst excitedly through the parlor door, grabbed his wife by the waist, and swung her around joyfully.

"Whaaa...?"

"I've got a job!" and he planted a big kiss on her astonished cheek. "The Lord has provided beyond anything we've asked or thought of. God is wonderful!"

"Well... what... when... I mean, how...?" she was at a loss for words.

He laughed at her bewilderment and gave her another kiss. "I start tomorrow and it's not far from our place and the pay is even better than at the Tabernacle!" he announced happily.

"It...it sounds marvelous," she herself was beginning to smile now.

"Marvelous is exactly right," and he began dancing her around the parlor chanting, "'It's marvelous to my sight, it's marvelous to my sight; What the Lord has done for me, is marvelous to my sight!'"

They both fell laughing onto the sofa, all the gloom of yesterday completely forgotten in the joy of the moment.

“Don’t keep me in suspense any longer, dear,” her lip quivered slightly with the intense relief and gladness she felt, “I don’t want to be left out of the Lord’s blessing, you know,” she managed a laugh through the tears of joy beginning to well up within her.

Femi related in detail all that had transpired in John’s shop that morning. Blessed received the news with thanks, though her enthusiasm dampened slightly at the thought of her husband taking such a lowly position.

But necessity has a persuasive way of combating pride. The demands of hunger predominate over the dictates of fancy. And so, she was grateful for the provision, though her self-image was battered and dented in the process.

That, however, was a far greater mercy than this provision of daily bread, had she but realized it.

~

“Guinea Brocade and Lace are along the back right wall. You’ll find the Batiks and Wax on the left rear side.” John was orienting Femi to the layout of the shop and current pricing. “For the next few days, you can watch carefully what I do and how I assist the customers so you’ll get a feel for the business.”

Femi applied himself diligently, learning many new things about the differences in cloth quality and their price ranges. He saw that the shop was neatly organized and that all matters were handled decently and in order. An even deeper respect for brother John developed in his mind.

“I don’t carry any poor quality cloth. It doesn’t pay to deal cheaply and give to people what you yourself wouldn’t be happy with. It’s what the Lord expects of us, anyway.”

“Sounds like, ‘Do unto others what you would have them do unto you,’ Femi remarked, seeing the similarity between what the Scriptures taught and the way John conducted his business.

“Col.3:23,24 commands us to do our work heartily, as for the Lord, and not for men. It’s the Lord Christ whom we serve,” John reinforced Femi’s contribution, not only with the Scriptures, but by his very manner of life. It had great impact on Femi.

“So, I try to treat each customer as if I were providing a service to the Lord Jesus Himself. And by supplying only quality products, the people obtain the value they expect and many of them have become loyal customers because of it,” John explained, not boasting at all, but merely stating what he knew to be true.

“It is foolishness to try and obtain exorbitant prices from people: really its wickedness. I price the cloth reasonably to one and all alike, whether they are wealthy or not. The Scriptures tell us in Prov.20:10, ‘The Lord hates both these things: Dishonest weights and dishonest measures.’

“You can see why I’ve had no success in finding someone to work with me. How many people can you find in this Nigeria whose greed doesn’t lead them to take advantage of people for the sake of their own gain?”

The question’s answer was self-evident and needed no comment. “Another thing that I do is to not show preference to selfish and self-assertive people who have no regard for others. Many times people will push their way past others as if they were the only ones to be considered, demanding whatever it is that they want.

“That, I do not tolerate at all. The Bible says in I Pet.2:17, ‘Honor all men.’ It’s not godly to ignore another simply because someone else is impatient and puffed up by his own pride. So, I make it a practice to politely ask the person insisting on their own way to please patiently wait until I finish with the person I’m attending to at the moment.”

Femi was deeply impressed. *Where do you ever discover such things practiced in Nigeria? This John is a man of real conviction who takes seriously the teaching of the Word of God about everything. No wonder people return to him time after time. He truly loves and serves them from a selfless heart and they know it. Now this is a real testimony.*

The day passed swiftly as Femi straightened cloth, greeted and assisted customers, and watched carefully how John conversed with people as he conducted his trade. He noticed three things repeatedly as he observed his friend.

This John, eh, he's free from what you see virtually everywhere else in this Nigeria. He's not greedy at all, never is there dishonesty in any of his dealings, and no laziness is ever to be seen in him. It's really the way things ought to be.

What a contrast to the place I've just come from! And that was supposed to be the house of God! This cloth shop is more like heaven than that place ever was! Huh, it's really so simple. Obedience to the Word of God is for every area of life. That's all. May the Lord bless this dear brother.

~

"How was the first day at work, dear?" Blessed called from the kitchen as Femi entered the parlor. He could tell that she was greatly settled in her heart after the turmoil of the previous two days. And that gladdened his own heart tremendously.

"It was...how shall I describe it? It was...I know this might sound kind of crazy, but it was almost like a spiritual retreat," Femi was satisfied with this explanation as it expressed what he truly felt about the experiences of the day.

"Is that...?" Blessed's interest was aroused as she joined him in the parlor, wiping her hands on a cloth. "Well, you'll have to tell me more than that," she insisted smilingly. "It sounds wonderful!"

Her husband proceeded to relate all that he had witnessed, what he had learned about the various types and grades of cloth, and especially his observations about John's principles of business and their biblical foundation.

Blessed sat back with a growing light of admiration reflecting in her eyes. *I'm happy, so happy, and challenged. John's doing what others aren't even talking about doing. And Femi is happy, more than I've seen him in months. Maybe this is truly the Lord at work after all.*

"I learned more about godly living and gained more insight into the truth of God's Word in this one day than I have at months at the Tabernacle," Femi exclaimed as if he had been liberated from a darksome cell.

She smiled in acknowledgment. But something in his last statement troubled her heart. Maybe it was that he no longer had a position of respect which meant that she didn't either.

Perhaps it seemed a disrespectful thing to say about the influence of an anointed Man of God. It could have been that the mention of their former church brought the shameful recollection of their public disgrace back into her mind.

Likely it was a combination of many things. But it set her to thinking about their future church attendance. "Femi, I'm really happy about what the Lord has done in providing so unexpectedly for our needs in this way. I can tell that you're glad too," she looked at him and saw the expected agreement in his eyes.

Her eyes lowered, showing traces of troubling darkening their luster of the previous moments. She voiced what had come to her heart at his last comment. "What are we going to do about going to church now that we are... well, you know," she finished as if it were too awkward for her to even mention.

"It's a good question," Femi mused as he lapsed into silence. "There seem to be two difficulties facing us, dear. One is that, since I've been a pastor in a large and widely known ministry, a certain reputation precedes ahead of us wherever we might go. Surely news like ours will rapidly spread, and I doubt if any of the churches would welcome us under the circumstances.

"Secondly, and more important in my mind, is this. I don't know of anywhere in this city where we could go without encountering the same false emphasis on Prosperity and all the rest of it.

"I don't know of anywhere that the Word of God is truly being taught in simplicity and truth. You saw what the ministers were like who turned out for the city-wide vigil. Not much of a selection there," was his final, almost discouraged, comment.

His answer only confirmed her inner fears. They were outcasts with no real place to go, almost like lepers. It was very disturbing to her. Church had been such a part of her daily life which seemed threatened now to be completely cut off.

“But surely there’s something we can do, somewhere we can go? There has to be, doesn’t there?” her voice was strained with anxiety. “How can we live without church? I mean, it just wouldn’t be right,” was her confused and distressful appeal.

Femi sympathized with her dilemma. He, as well, could not conceive of a life without attending church of some type. But where could they go? It seemed as if there were no solutions before them.

Suddenly, an idea flashed through his mind. *I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before. Of course! The fellowship in John’s parlor! They would welcome us and they’re not caught up in all this funny stuff like other churches are.*

Femi turned excitedly to his dejected wife. “Blessed, dear, there’s a perfect solution!”

She brightened up immediately. “There is? Well, what is it?” she eagerly asked.

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of it earlier. The fellowship at John and Priscilla’s place: They’ll gladly welcome us and they’re not involved in all this funny practices and teaching like so many others are,” he voiced the answer with great confidence that the matter was resolved.

“Oh...” she sounded deflated. “But that’s not a church! It’s a... something... a... well, I don’t know what you want to call it, anyway, but it’s not a church, Femi,” she couldn’t conceive of that gathering qualifying to be called a real church.

“I mean, there’s no building, they have no pastor or founder, no one leads in worship or prayer-points, and they don’t even tithe! How could that ever be considered a church?” she was completely taken aback by his suggestion that this would solve their problem.

“But didn’t you say that you’d like to come with me to their gathering?” Femi reminded her of her former willingness.

“Yes, but that was while we were still in a real church. That was different. I don’t even know what you’d call this thing. If someone asked me where I was going to church, what would I say? ‘Cloth-Traders Tabernacle?’”

“Blessed, it doesn’t matter what something is called, it matters what it is. This is a group of genuine loving people who truly obey and glorify the Lord, who worship Him in spirit and truth. Isn’t that what a real church is supposed to be?” Femi pleaded with her to consider things from the standpoint of the Scriptures.

She was flustered at his answer, knowing that he was right. But she would be so embarrassed to only attend something like that, something so foreign to her entire previous frame of reference.

“I’d like us to at least try it, dear,” Femi spoke tenderly and encouragingly to his wife, understanding that it was a totally new concept for her to digest.

“I don’t know, Femi, I just don’t know if I could. It’s all so strange and... so unlike real church. I’m not used to that type of something at all.”

“What are your alternatives?” Femi quietly inquired with pointed sensitivity.

She looked up nervously, like a lost antelope in the forest, “I don’t really know,” she whispered helplessly.

~

“Ah! My trusty assistant has arrived, and right on time,” John greeted Femi warmly the next morning. “How was the first day, brother?”

“I was totally blessed. I can’t remember enjoying work so much in I don’t know when! And I learned so much, and I don’t just mean about Wax and Super Prints,” he added laughing.

John joined him in their shared gladness. “Well, you’re not the only one that was blessed. Your work was done well and with such a willing spirit of helpfulness. I really thank the Lord for His leading for both of our families,” John sincerely expressed his heartfelt gratitude.

“We thank God, brother. Only the Lord could have engineered these circumstances the way He did. We bless the Lord.”

“So what does Blessed think about all these developments?”

“Well, she’s really happy for me and for the Lord’s supplying our needs in this way. Really, she’s very glad,” he paused as he reflected momentarily on their discussion about church. “She’s pretty mixed up, though, about what to do about church now that we’re no longer at Christ’s Tabernacle,” he looked at John hoping he might have some suggestion.

“What did you discuss with her about that?”

“I said that I didn’t think any “church” would welcome us under the circumstances and that I didn’t want to go somewhere that funny practices and teachings were going on, anyway.”

“Anything else?”

“It came to my mind that attending the fellowship at your home would be the ideal solution to our dilemma.”

“And what was her response to that?”

“She was thrown into a whirlwind by that one, saying that it wasn’t a real church at all and something too strange to seriously consider. I asked her what alternatives she had. She didn’t know what to say.”

John reflected over the conversation for a minute before simply saying, “Let’s just commit your and Blessed’s decision into the hands of God.”

~

“All posters and handbills have been dispatched to our key contacts in every major city, Sir,” Pastor Emmanuel reported with satisfaction to his G.O.

“Well done, Pastor. That is one of the critical links in the success of our state-wide Overcomers Vigil. I personally appreciate your devotedness to this ministry.”

“Thank you, Sir, it is a privilege for me to serve in this way,” he was alert to every occasion to worm his way into the Reverend’s good graces.

“Sister Suki, how is the progress on the duplicating of your CDs?”

“There is no problem, Sir. The final twenty thousand of the ten releases will soon be finished, making a total of two hundred thousand copies available for the outreach. I might add that all arrangements for transport, tables, awnings, and sales personnel have been finalized,” she smiled with professional competency.

Benson returned the smile, already adding up in his calculating mind the revenue to be generated by their sale. “It’s a pleasure working with you, Sister Suki,” he smoothly complimented her.

“I’m only too happy to contribute my part to the success of this ministry, Sir,” she replied with convincing sincerity.

“Now, in order to ensure that there will be no last minute hitches, all pastoral staff will be required to work overtime until 6:30 each evening until the day of the event. I think you all understand?” There was no room allowed for any who didn’t.

“Yes, Sir,” the unanimous chorus echoed from the assembled team.

~

“Well, I’ve never been busier in my whole life, I imagine,” Mary was bustling about her now overloaded disaster of a desk trying to attend to her increased demands. “Peter and I will just have to do what it takes to make this a success, that’s all, even if it does mean having to leave the office at such a late hour.”

She noticed Suki sitting in her office going over some of the voluminous Vigil correspondence. “Well, Suki, I don’t suppose it will hurt this jolly old belly of mine to wait a little

later to eat anyway, eh?" she chuckled out loud to herself as she pinched a big roll of fat for emphasis.

Suki smiled out of politeness rather than amusement. "No, I don't suppose that it will, Mary," as she smiled a second time, this one being with satisfaction.

Peter and Mary's leaving the office at 6:30 was the final needed detail in her carefully conceived scheme.

~

"Good morning, my sister," Priscilla greeted Blessed from the doorway. "Oh, Priscilla, you're welcome-O. I'm so happy to see you. Enter, enter. You're highly welcome," Blessed was truly glad to receive her unexpected guest. "How are the children?"

"Thank the Lord, they are fine, fine. Thank you. And how be your pickings?"

"No problem, we thank God. Please, have your seat. I'm coming-O," as she hurried to the kitchen to prepare some small entertainment for her visitor.

Lord, please guide me that I might encourage and help my sister to understand Your ways. Open her eyes to see the truth of Your Word, both for her as a wife and as a member of Your church. I'm so very thankful for leading me in this service of love for the sake of my sister, Blessed, and for the glory of Your kingdom. May You be honored in all that is said and done here today, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Blessed soon returned with a tray of sliced mango, groundnuts, and biscuits accompanying a Malta.

"Thank you very much, my sister, I'm very grateful. Let's thank the Lord," as she poured out her praise to the Lord Jesus with quiet earnestness.

She's so different than the pastor's wives I know from Christ's Tabernacle: no loudness, self-promotion, and fancy dressing. Just a peaceful gentle quietness. I think I like her.

The conversation turned to domestic subjects of children, meals and markets, sewing and farming. Blessed found herself relaxing and thoroughly enjoying the visit. *She seems so... genuine... Yes, that's it, genuine.*

"God has given us wives a great ministry," Priscilla began.

He has? Whatever could she mean?

"From the very beginning, the Lord made us to be the helpers to our husbands. This is the great work of any woman of God. Eve was created for Adam, as his faithful companion and support in all that the Lord had called him to be and to do," Priscilla sensed that she had Blessed's undivided attention.

"Our husbands face many conflicts and dangers that we do not directly encounter. They protect us from many assaults and evils that they themselves squarely face as the God-ordained leaders in their homes."

It's true. I'd never thought of it like that before. But I know that Femi has been the one bearing the brunt of all of this evil that has come upon us. Thank God for him. I should really be more grateful and supportive rather than adding to his burdens.

"We need to be grateful and supportive of our husbands so they are encouraged to do the Lord's will with confidence. Our homes should be a refuge from the difficulties they endure for our sakes, and not an added weight to the burdens they already bear."

Blessed's mouth almost dropped open. *How does she know what I've been thinking?*

She was just beginning to glimpse how the Spirit of God leads in impressing His truth upon one's heart. It was something she had seldom experienced, but it produced a solemn holy fear within her: not a frightful invasion, but a purity of gladdened welcome to be drawn into obedience.

"What you're saying is exactly true, I'm certain of it, but how did you know what I was thinking?" Blessed timidly inquired.

Priscilla only laughed good-naturedly which served to lighten her spirits. "My dear friend, be assured, I'm no prophetess," she smiled at her again.

“It’s how God speaks to our hearts through His Word. The truth of the Word of God has entered your heart and led you to the same applications and convictions that it has to many godly women. Nothing mysterious, really,” she reached out, smiling, and held her hand in friendship.

Blessed returned the gesture of affection willingly. *I’m so glad she came. I can’t remember enjoying a visit so much like I have this one. Lord, I give You thanks.*

Priscilla finished the last of her Maltina and smiled kindly at her friend before gently commenting, “John and I know that what was said about Femi and you on Sunday is not true. We’re sorry, Blessed. May the Lord uphold you both that this will not be upsetting to your faith.”

She looked with tenderness and sympathy at the silent Blessed. “Everyone who chooses to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer at the hands of the ungodly. We must expect it to be that way.”

With a momentary surprise she glanced into Priscilla’s wise and caring eyes. She thought for a moment about asking her how she knew that the charges against them were false, but decided against it. It didn’t really matter. She knew it was so: and that, Blessed was sure of.

“Thank you, Priscilla, your visit and kindness have helped me more than you could realize. I am really very grateful,” Blessed took her friend’s hand again in affectionate emphasis.

“We thank the Lord, my sister. I’m very happy that we could discuss the Word of God together as we did. His Word always refreshes the heart, doesn’t it?” she serenely commented.

Blessed felt a flush of warmth rush up the sides of her neck as gladness filled her heart. *It’s true. I’m truly refreshed. Lord, I’m so thankful to You. May Your mighty name be praised.* She smiled at Priscilla with a nod of agreement.

Taking her hand affectionately once again, she softly said, “Let’s pray together before I must go.”

“R - r - r - ring!”

“Well, here we go again! I’ve never talked so much in my whole life! Will this thing never give me a moment’s rest?” Mary threw up her hands in mock frustration.

“R - r - r - ring!” The phone demanded more of a response from her than what she had just said.

“Okay, okay. I hear you. I’m coming-O,” Mary had managed to regain most of her bubbly composure.

“Christ’s Tabernacle of Glory,” she cheerfully answered the phone with her usual courteous warmth.

“Good evening, Sir... Fine, fine, thank you, Reverend... We’re very honored to have you and your ministry represented and participating in the state wide vigil, Sir... Yes, Sir... Please hold on a moment while I transfer you to Rev. Benson’s office... Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir,” Mary connected the two reverends with a sigh of relief.

“Can you believe it? Even I’m getting tired of talking!” Mary was laughing light-heartedly at herself. “I can see why the good Rev. Dr. has us all working late these days. There are so-o-o-o many details to attend to!” she glanced at Suki for confirmation of the obvious.

Suki sat patiently listening to Mary’s nearly non-stop banter as she awaited Dr. Benson’s visitors to exit his office. “Mary, I’m certain that this program could never take place without your competent coordination,” Suki smiled at her with seeming sincere flattery.

Mary brightened self-consciously at the unexpected compliment. “Well, I don’t know if I’d go that far,” she interjected with a modesty born more of not wanting to sound arrogant than of sincerity. “Though I have done quite a bit, I must admit,” she added, happy for whatever praise and recognition she could claim for her efforts.

Suki smiled back at her pleasantly as she continued to carefully manicure her nails. Actually, she was methodically filing those on her right hand to a near razor’s edge.

Casually glancing at the bustling secretary shuffling through the disarray of papers cluttering her desk, she tested the claw-like sharpness of her fingers upon her neck.

A slight smile of satisfaction crossed her lips. *There, that should do just fine.*

Benson’s office door swung open, releasing the volume of hearty laughter accompanying the group of retreating reverend dignitaries. Final handshakes and pleasantries were exchanged in the outer office with a nod from Benson for Mary to accompany them to their awaiting vehicles.

“Sister Suki,” Mary professionally requested, “could you please attend to the phones while I escort our distinguished guests?”

“Why, certainly, Ma’am,” and then turning with the appropriate gesture of respect, “Good afternoon, Sirs, may the Lord grant you a safe journey.”

“Thank you, my dear, may God bless you and your anointed ministry.”

“Amen, thank you, Sir.”

The outer door clicked shut on the entourage. Dr. Benson had already retreated into his own inner sanctum. *This is the perfect time.*

Suki sprang silently across the office floor to Mary’s desk. Rapidly rifling through the drawer’s contents, she soon discovered her prize amid its disorganized collection. Swiftly she removed Mary’s house key and returned the remaining ones to their former place and shut the drawer.

Quickly and quietly she returned to her seat and calmly flipped through the pages of a recent news periodical. An evil glint shone in her eye.

It will all be over now in just a very little while.

“Priscilla’s visit was such an encouragement. She is such a dear Christian,” Blessed commented to her husband that evening. “She’s so understanding and kind.”

“We thank the Lord, dear. I’m very happy. I’ve always been impressed with her quiet godly ways, myself. What all did you talk about?”

“Oh, many things: children, markets, farming...” she paused briefly and raised thankful and bashful eyes to meet Femi’s, “and being grateful and supportive of our husbands.”

Femi smiled at her appreciatively. “The Scriptures tell us that, ‘He who finds a wife, finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.’ I know that’s very true in my own home.”

Blessed lowered her eyes in embarrassment. “I... I’m really very fortunate to have a husband like you. I really want to please you and assist you and, well, to be the kind of wife I should be.”

“I thank God for you, Blessed. I’ve never regretted our day of marriage, you know,” he looked at her tenderly and caught her shy glance at him.

It’s how things should be.

~

Shadows began to lengthen their darkened fingers across the city in the evening’s declining light.

“Oh! Peter will be here in just fifteen minutes! Cai! I’ve so much to do yet. I don’t know if I’ll ever see the top of my desk again,” Mary was distractedly hurrying about as if a constant flow of words might hasten the completion of her seemingly hopeless task.

“Is there anything I can do to help you, Mary?” Suki sweetly offered.

“You’re such a dear, Sister Suki. You’ve been so kind and thoughtful all day long. Really, I don’t how I could have ever gotten this far without you. Well, if you’re volunteering, I’m recruiting,” Mary laughed in her typical jolly manner.

Side by side, the two attempted to create some semblance of order out of the chaos of her desk top until her husband’s arrival. Predictably as clockwork, Peter pulled up at 6:30 on the dot.

“Ah, here’s Peter now. I should have known; he’s on the dot. He always is, you know. It’s one of the things I love about the man...” The door swung open upon the two women.

“Welcome, Mr. Peter, dear. You’re just in time to rescue my poor old soul from near collapse! If it weren’t for this darling helper here,” she squeezed Suki for emphasis, “I don’t know what I would have done today.”

Absentmindedly, she fished in her drawer for her keys, depositing them into her purse without so much as glancing at them. “Why, she has organized and answered phones and...” the detailed report of the day’s activities freely flowed as Suki escorted them to their awaiting Peugeot in the now darkened parking lot.

The outer office door locked behind her as Peter and Mary drove the ten minutes to their flat. Suki carefully replaced Mary’s house key in her desk drawer and headed for Benson’s office. She extinguished the lights in the outer office before entering his own.

I’ve got exactly twenty minutes to finish him and set myself free.

~

“How was your visit with Blessed, Dear?” John inquired.

“I think the Lord really used it to comfort and encourage her heart.”

“Thank the Lord. How is she regarding what happened at the Tabernacle?”

“She was understandably distressed and somewhat confused about the whole thing. But I think the Lord has helped her to see things from a different standpoint now. It’s not easy-O.”

“We need to pray for both of them, especially Blessed. Embracing spiritual truth requires hard decisions. You’ll never find a multitude to support you in taking a stand upon the true Word of God.”

Priscilla smiled knowingly at her husband. “No, you never do, do you?”

~

With predetermined purpose, Suki arranged candles upon the center table separating the front of Benson's desk from the cushioned overstuffed sofa. Well chilled beverage along with delicate crystal goblets joined the romantic atmosphere being created.

Both candles were lit while the Reverend was busily pouring over his financial statement regarding the state-wide vigil to be held that weekend. He didn't even notice what Suki was preparing.

The resounding "Pop!" of the bottle's cork got his attention as Suki turned out the office lights.

"Whaa...?" Benson looked up, almost perturbed at the intrusion upon his monetary considerations.

Suki had sauntered to his side with an inviting seductive smile. "You've been working so hard, dear, I thought we'd take a short break and celebrate a little."

Teasingly, she pulled at his necktie and led him, now willing and grinning, to the awaiting sofa. The beverage gurgled into its elegant two containers. His was presented as she lifted her own to gently clink the rims together.

"Here's to the new Mr. and Mrs. Benson," and she blew an enticing kiss across the tops of the sparkling crystal.

~

"Now, where could that key have gotten to?" Mary was digging through the random catch-all that was her purse. After several searches in vain, she concluded in exasperation, "It must be back at the office."

"I knew we should have replaced that key chain long ago, Peter. I guess we're just a little too tight with our money. Well, there's nothing to do but to go back. I'm sure it's in my desk drawer."

So, back they climbed into their ancient Peugeot for the ten minute ride back to the office.

~

"Oh, God, my Father, expose to my wife the deception of longing for money and the evils it leads to. Convict her to abandon all for what she knows is true from Your Word. Show to her what Your church truly is and deliver Your people at Christ's Tabernacle from the evils that are happening there, in Jesus' name, Amen!" Femi concluded his fervent and heartfelt prayer in earnest humility.

~

Ten minutes left. They're on their way back by now. The time has come.

"I want to really celebrate, darling," Suki purred in Benson's ear as she removed his necktie and flung it onto the floor. Fool that he was, he did not resist in the slightest as item after item was lustily removed by this wanton woman and scattered with daring randomness across the office.

Her own followed, but were carefully placed near the sofa in cautiously contrived order. The stage was set.

Any moment from now, they'll arrive and it will all be over.

~

“Oh, Reverend Benson’s car and Suki’s both are still here, Peter. I know they’ve been working very closely together on this one. Of course, they have to with all their responsibilities,” Mary rattled on while she opened the outer office door and switched on the lights.

~

The pretended panic in Suki’s voice sent chills down his spine, “Quick! Get dressed! Somebody’s here!” she hissed in a frightened whisper as she pushed him away from her.

Benson stumbled helplessly, not knowing where his clothing had fallen.

Immediately Suki raked her razor-sharp nails across her thigh drawing blood. Instantly she reached her purposefully placed underwear and pressed them to her self-inflicted wound, staining them in one brief moment.

Noting Benson’s location, she swiftly swung her leg, overturning the center table and sending shattered goblets and foaming liquid noisily to the floor.

Snuffed out in the violent overthrow, the candles extinguished their glow, plunging the room into deep obscurity.

~

Startled, Mary turned to her husband, “Peter, did you hear something?”

~

Before Benson could recover to even utter one word, Suki had reached his side. “Quick, take these,” as she thrust her panties into his right hand.

With a wild slash of her sharpened claws, she gouged his eye unmercifully.

Benson shrieked in alarm and anguish and staggered backwards in the darkness, not knowing what had hit him.

~

“What is happening in there?” Peter and Mary froze in fright, staring first at each other, then at Benson’s closed office door.

~

“Awgh!” howled the Reverend as his nose and lip received the full force of Suki’s furious fist. The blow sent him sprawling to the floor in complete disorientation as his face quickly swelled and began to ooze blood.

Suki’s bloodcurdling scream pierced the blackness, petrifying the pained and bewildered Benson while rooting Peter and Mary to the spot.

Snatching up her carefully placed wrapper, she reached the door in three deft bounds.

Hastily the wrapper was clutched about her bare form as she burst into the outer office shrieking hysterically, having purposefully switched on the Reverend's lights in her flight.

Falling in a crumpled heap at Peter and Mary's feet, she wailed convulsively with one arm outstretched, accusingly pointing within, "He... he... he..." Suki sobbed uncontrollably and could say no more.

Horrified, Peter and Mary took in the incredible scene before them. Breathlessly they surveyed the evidence confronting their battered senses as Suki whimpered at their feet.

They saw Benson's wild passionate scattering of his clothes across the office floor. They envisioned the overturned table in Suki's desperate struggle to preserve the virtue of her saintly womanhood.

Benson's wounds testified to her valiant resistance of his lustful attack. The final evidence, blood stained panties still clutched in his hand, told the obvious tale of how her thigh received its wound.

The conclusion was inescapable and irrefutable. Slowly they turned their gaze to the dumbfounded Reverend, stupidly staring at them from the floor, too numb to even think of covering the shame of his nakedness.

Mary's expression shifted from that of shock, gradually phased into disgust, and finally settled into a fiery indignation.

For once, she only had one thing to say, but that one thing said it all, "You wicked, wicked man!"

And the Scripture was fulfilled which says,

*The one who commits adultery with a woman
Is lacking sense;
He who would destroy himself does it.
Wounds and disgrace he will find,
And his reproach will not be blotted out
Proverbs 6:32, 33*

15

"I've never been so shocked in my entire life!" Mary was telling her story for the some hundredth time. News travels fast with such reporters.

~

Sympathy poured in from far and wide for the innocent victim of the Rev. Benson's outrage. Suki was consoled and comforted by thousands. Cards, phone calls, and gifts -large gifts- rained in upon Sister Suki who had taken on the reputation as a virtuous martyr through the ordeal.

Everyone fully understood how she wished to relocate, away from the public eye for some time, until the trauma of the event subsided. The church unanimously agreed that the least they could do was to donate all the recording equipment to her as she left them to recover in solitude.

She, of course, was very grateful for all their kindness and support. She assured them that she would never forget them and would keep in touch over the next months. Tearfully, she was bid goodbye by the now devastated Christ's Tabernacle of Glory membership. It seemed as if they had lost their best and most glorious daughter.

~

"It is the judgment of this court that seventy-five percent of all assets of the Christ's Tabernacle of Glory be awarded to Mrs. Benson as the full and final settlement in this divorce proceeding," the judge's gavel came down with a resounding crack of finality.

~

Lagos, 37 km.

The driver sang along with wild abandon to the blaring newly released Suki Singer's CD at 100 km per hour.

Threading through the tangled web of Lagos traffic into Victoria Estates, the destination was reached. A remote-control garage door opener smoothly hummed in obedience to the driver's signal, welcoming its owner's arrival.

An impressive door swung in on the Italian marbled entryway displaying the imported full-length mirror facing the doorway. The owner stopped to admire herself in the glass.

You've done all right for yourself, darling: A new condo, a Mercedes, the latest recording equipment, and money enough to provoke a king to envy.

She smiled with satisfaction. *And it's not over yet. Lagos is a big place, and there are many churches, large churches, that are just waiting for someone like you: extremely talented, godly to all appearances, and strikingly beautiful.*

She laughed a little laugh to herself in the gilded mirror and, with a final glance and a flippant kick of her heel, Suki sent the door swinging shut with a crisp click of finality.

Or so it seemed to her. But the fearful Day of Judgment in fiery wrath will plunge her into eternal torment; and that is final.

~

Another Sunday.

"Femi," came Blessed's trembling voice in the dead of night. "Femi," she sobbed it again chokingly a second time. He was fully awake now and turned toward his wife in the bed. "Oh, Femi!" she was convulsing now upon his breast.

"May God forgive me!" tears wet his chest from his grief-stricken darling. She gasped it out, again and again amidst heart-racking sobs. "Awgh," rasped his dear Blessed for whom he had prayed these long months, "Femi, can you ever forgive me?" She dissolved into tears once more.

He embraced her, his own tears mingling with her own. There they lay: weeping, praying, sharing their hearts, rejoicing.

Minutes stretched into hours in the night's stillness. A oneness, tenderness, and a profound depth of love until then unknown became their portion, sent from on high.

Timidly, she at last ventured to ask, "Femi, may I join you in the fellowship this afternoon?"

He made no reply but simply gathered her into his arms. She could see through the moon's silvery light that he was smiling with unmistakable gladness.

Suddenly, they both were laughing: rolling and hugging and laughing in the sheer joy of the moment.

They had known the truth, and the truth had set them free.

Epilogue

*An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land:
The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests rule on their own authority;
And My people love it so!
But what will you do at the end of it?
Jer.5:30, 31*

*For from the least of them even to the greatest of them,
Everyone is greedy for gain,
And from the prophet even to the priest
Everyone practices deceit
Jer.6:13*

*Thus says the Lord, "Stand at the crossroads and look:
Ask for the ancient paths,
Ask where the good way is,
And walk in it,
And you shall find rest for your souls."
But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'
Jer.6:16*

*Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words
Which are worthless.
Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury...
And then come and stand before Me in this house,
Which is called by My name, and say,
"We are delivered!" -
That you may do all these abominations?
Has this house, which is called by My name,
Become a den of robbers in your sight?
Jer.7:8-11*

*This is what the Lord Almighty says:
Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you;
They fill you with false hopes,
They speak visions from their own minds,
Not from the mouth of the Lord
Jer.23:16*

*For it is time for judgment to begin
With the household of God
I Pet.4:17*