

# Punched By An *Angel*



Ryan Gray

## *Part Five*

*A handsome Asian woman with porcelain skin and long, thick highlighted hair stood in front of a massive cross surrounded by manicured, lush foliage. She smiled warmly and held out her arms in a warm measured greeting, "Welcome to the Sound of Salvation! The fastest growing church in the Midwest, and home to your favorite brother and founder, Pastor John, and his beautiful wife, Janine."*

*The camera angle switched as the announcer continued her introduction; she strolled deeper into the garden as she spoke, "I'm Sarah, and on behalf of the Sound of Salvation, we wish to welcome any new guests and returning members for an incredible time of worship, Bible teaching and family fellowship."*

*"Don't forget," she smiled warmly, "At the bottom of this screen and in the envelopes in front of you is all the information you will need to donate to this amazing ministry." The camera angle widened, revealing that Sarah had approached the giant cross centered in the garden. She laid a graceful hand upon it and peered up, as though 'pondering,' "Because, you never know, who else still needs to hear the truth."*

I stood behind my podium, Bible open, hands spread wide. A position I had been in nearly 1,000 times before.

Yet, this was the most nervous I had felt since I first opened my Bible in front of a crowd. My first audience was fifteen years earlier in our small single-family garage with two other families and a 70-year-old widower. Janine had still been pregnant with our daughter, I had finished my Bible degree only six months prior, and I was still selling cars part-time at a used car lot, two towns over. To make ends meet, Janine taught preschool, down the street. Hence our general countenance was that of the walking dead. But, man...were we happy! After three blissful years of marriage, and a healthy pregnancy, I was now pursuing my passion. Preaching on Sundays, a work I KNEW God was calling me to.

"BUT, what if I say the wrong thing? What if I am boring, how will I know if the neighbors will even like me or care about God?" As if it were yesterday, I could still feel those thoughts rummaging through my skull as I kept Janine awake the night before, tossing and turning. "OR worse yet, what if no one shows up and I was wrong? What if God did not call me here? What then?" But as I felt the wave of nausea in my stomach turn to knots with only fifteen minutes before the moment of truth, that calming, perfect feeling of sunshine washed peace into my soul. "We'll be fine," was all the inner voice said, and that was all I needed.

Six months later, my garage was too small for the growing crowd. In a year, the YMCA gymnasium we rented was overflowing, and in five years our first church building was inadequate. In evangelical church circles, I had become a rock star! Even today, I usually have three or four pastoral teams from around the country, sometimes from around the world, come to shadow me, and learn "my secrets." 'Secrets' I was all too eager to share.

These thoughts flashed through my mind like never before. Many of these memories were a result of our whirlwind trip to Mexico resulting in us purchasing the land and orphanage with our retirement funds. But it hadn't stopped there, on the way home Janine made a list of

furniture, handbags, and jewelry she was going to sell. Then on a layover in Phoenix, she got on the phone with her rich friends back home and demanded they donate to an annual trust solely for our new orphan ministry. After we arrived home, Janine, within seconds of getting my permission, had found a real estate agent, put the house up for sale, then sat the kids down. We explained our change in schools, so we could afford to help more orphans and the poor.

My daughter was the first to react. "Duh Dad, of course, we can do that to help out. Besides, you and Mom liked our school way more than we did."

Then my son pipped in, "Can I go with you to the orphanage next time? Maybe I can bring my comic books and video games to share?"

As my wife and I glanced at one another with shock, Denzin chimed in, suddenly appearing next to me, munching a green apple. "Out of the mouths of babes..."

I came back to the moment, remembering where I was, I played with my notes then reached under my lectern for a bottle of water and took a sip. My "prep" gave the audience time to settle down, and it allowed me time to procrastinate.

I chuckled to myself thinking of how cocky and arrogant I had become. Back in our old house's garage, I was terrified and could do nothing but claw my way up that straight and narrow path, desperate for just one or two folks to show up and hear about Jesus. However, after our incredible "success" the scariest part of my 'journey' became who I would have to offend this week because I didn't have time to sit and meet with everyone. Or, who should I hire, for yet another new position, because we were growing, again! "Life was rough" we arrogantly chuckled to each other around the office, as I'd 'humbly' accept yet another pay raise from my financial committee.

The thoughts, embarrassment, and conviction swirling through my head finally emptied themselves out of my mouth. "I am such an ass!" I blurted out, forgetting that almost 3,000 church people were staring at me, waiting for the weekly message.

At the semi-swear word, half the audience held its breath, the other half leaned forward and smiled. Bob, who always arrived 45 minutes early so he could sit in the front row, left of center, grinned and commented loudly to his neighbor, "Buckle up, this is gonna be a good one!"

"Excuse me, friends, I mean..." I shook my head attempting to gain my composure. I looked up, spying Denzin leaning against the back wall. He grinned and winked at me while munching on a massive bucket of cinema popcorn. 'That little punk,' I gnashed my teeth as I thought to myself, 'Is he just here to watch me fall flat on my face as I get run out of my own church on a rail?' His right eye sparkled at me like a warning beacon on a lighthouse in treacherous waters. Treacherous waters I felt from all sides. But which waters do I choose? The waters in the here and now, that could only kill my earthly body, or the waters in the beyond, lasting for eternity?

That long-lost desperate feeling, clawing its way through my guts, intensified. Sweat dripped down the side of my head as I swallowed hard. 'I can't do this,' I thought to myself just as something inside of me quit. I could feel myself shrink inside.

At that, a long-lost feeling of cleansing sunshine washed over my soul. "Just be honest," was all the inner voice of peace said; it was all I needed.

"No, I am not sorry. Because I have been an ass!" I reaffirmed, "And that's Biblical!" And I was off - or rather, should I say, we were off: "Like Balaam in Numbers, the Lord has been

saying something to me, something I was too arrogant to hear or stubborn to consider. Like Balaam in the book of Numbers, I have been greedy and would rather have a little bit of fame than be humble before God! God, the Creator of the Universe, the only reason we have any of this, this..." I waved my hands and peered around the massive auditorium, "This monstrosity. A gargantuan building constructed for you," I pointed at the crowd, "and for me," I pushed a thumb into my chest, "but not constructed for Him!" I finished my thought with a finger thrust at the ceiling.

"Anyone remember our first building?" I grinned. "We had two services, about 150 folks at each service and we all knew one another, right?" I saw several familiar faces nodding. "When we kept growing, I can't say what the solution was." I threw my hands up in surrender, "Cause we," I paused and shook my head, "No, it was I! I never took the time to ask. I just assumed it was my place to have a bigger and bigger Sunday service!"

I stepped to the right side of the stage, "Maybe, I was supposed to raise up another pastor, recruit 30 or 40 of you all and send you to the other side of the city or another state, maybe even another country!" I stepped to the other side of the stage, "Or maybe, I was to let one of our amazing associate pastors step up and give them a chance to take over as senior pastor, so I could go and start another church somewhere else. Maybe I could have even gone to another country, like the Apostle Paul!" I drifted back towards center stage, "But we will never know, because I was too insecure and too egotistical, eager to soak up all the glory. I should have rather stepped out of the way and let that glory drift to the heavens where it belongs!"

"Besides! If this massive building was for God, do you really think it would be empty six days out of the week? Do you think God would have a huge building used only for a massive crowd to hear mostly feel-good lectures and thinly veiled music concerts?" I shook my head and scoffed, "But that is what I wanted, that is what I chose!" I beat my chest with an emphatic fist.

I calmed down and shook my head, "I chose to pour 10 million dollars of God's money into this land and building. Why? For His glory? So God would rejoice in what we...or should I say, I built? Like Nebuchadnezzar, overlooking the hanging gardens of Babylon, so I can thump my chest and say," I pounded my ribs firmly again, then bellowed, "Look what I have made: 'Look at my kingdom!'" My mouth rattled off words faster than my brain could connect, "Not, His kingdom come, HIS WILL be done!"

I stared into the crowd, blankly. "Let's be clear, this place is about John's Kingdom and John's will!"

I snapped out of it and began making intense eye contact with the audience. "No! No more, I stand before you to repent...Like the Pharisees in the Gospels, I have become nothing but a white-washed tomb. Good only to store a corpse and dry bones." I shook my head, "And that's all I've had to offer you over the past ten years. Empty words, empty leadership, empty songs of worship." I spoke as I drifted across the stage.

I suddenly spun on the crowd and lifted my head, "Keep in mind, this is all on me, not the worship leaders, the elders or deacons, my staff, or even my family. I'm the head, I reaped the glory, I am to blame!" I stepped up to the edge of the stage, "I thought I was your pastor." I looked over the crowd, trying to connect with every face, "And I am sorry because I am not and was never meant to be."

I continued to look the crowd over. As I did, I noticed a row of middle-aged Asian men in navy blue suits, avoiding eye contact. 'The Korean delegation. Holy Moses! How could this get

any more awkward?' My brain began to whirl as it tried to stem the tide of words flowing from my guts through my mouth.

"Don't stop!" The warmth I'd already allowed back onto my soul demanded I complete my task.

I winced, forcing the awkward feelings out of my brain, stood, and got back to work.

"I never was your 'Pastor.' At least, not in the way I advertised it." I shouted out before strolling back to the pulpit, and placed my hands on my Bible, "In this book, it clearly states, 'He is the Good Shepherd.' And that we," I circled my hands widely, "All of us, are His sheep. Me too! I am also a sheep, just like you. Somewhere along the line, I forgot that. I forgot that I am not any more or less special than you. As the great Apostle Paul said, 'Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in Paul's name?' No! Of course not."

I plopped down on the stage in my navy blue suit and pulled on my red power tie until it came off. I popped open my top button and sat back on my hands, releasing a massive sigh to the ceiling. Tears welled in my eyes as I chewed on my lip thinking for a moment. "You know we have some of the most famous pastors and biggest churches on earth ending their careers in disgrace. Affairs, scandals...stealing from their own churches." I sat forward, hands dropped in my lap, "I just knew, I was better than all of them. I would never cheat on my wife, and I haven't stolen a cent in my life."

Shameful tears dripped from my face, "But I have stolen, and I haven't been a good husband or father." Glancing right, I noticed the Korean delegation was cut in half, but those who remained were sitting forward, the desperate need to know where I was going with this madness was written all over their faces. "I have taken the money you gave me, for the work of the gospel and used it on selfish things!" I stood and walked over to my lecture, "Do you see this!" I pointed at the oversized stand, "It's only meant to hold a bible and notes, maybe a bottle of water or two. However, we had this custom built for \$2,500," I rolled my eyes to the heavens and threw my hands in the air, "The old wooden one was donated by a church family for free, and still worked fine!" I pointed up at the camera following me around, "And even if we should be televising every stupid little thing we do, why did we need to purchase brand new cameras, again?"

I ran upstage right, "These drums, replaced our old ones, which still worked fine and were handed down to the youth." I scoffed at that comment, "UGH, handed down to the youth, doesn't that just sum up how we see ourselves? We spend all this money on ourselves, for a once-a-week church service, with all the best leaders and all the best equipment. But for our kids, our children! Our most valuable assets, our future, they get the lower budget, the hand-me-down equipment, and the youngest and least experienced pastors!

Why?" I looked around the crowd, locating and making eye contact with all the elders and deacons I could, "What are we thinking? What is wrong with us?" I screamed. My voice dropped as I rocked back onto my heels, "I know what we are thinking - I know what's wrong with us! As I said before, I am the reason this church isn't what it should be. The reason we don't take our youth seriously is the same reason I have been a bad husband and a worse father." I recentered myself on the stage and loomed over the crowd, "I know the truth, and I 'supposedly' have dedicated my life to teaching it. However," I stuck my finger in the air, "I neglected one tiny little detail." I took a breath and tried to continue, but a sudden lump in my throat gobbled up my words. I swallowed hard and tried to speak again, with mixed results, "I

didn't..." I spoke slowly, deliberately, and as clearly as possible, tears freely flowing from my eyes, "...I didn't take the time to teach my own kids the Bible. I haven't prayed or done a Bible study with my own wife for who knows how long," I looked left and down at my wife, making eye contact, "I haven't led my family towards Jesus ever since I became a 'successful' pastor. I never taught my family how to pray or why to read the Bible. Just, 'Show up on Sunday and you'll learn with the rest of the crowd.'" I paused, still staring at my wife, her eyes swollen and red as she wiped at them.

"Janine," I choked a bit, "I'm sorry I haven't been who you married, for a long time. I've led us in the wrong direction, the easy way, away from the straight and narrow. Forgive me, please, let me try to make up for it?" My wife clasped her hand onto her mouth, to stifle the sounds of sobbing. I took a step forward to go to her, to hold her, but that same inner voice, washing warmth into my soul, warned me to wait. She had her own baggage to handle.

I cleared my throat and wiped my eyes. I turned and faced the crowd, "I don't know where I go from here." I paused and waited, hoping that voice would continue to speak through me, and not leave me short, "I don't know how next Sunday will be different. I don't even know if we will meet. However, if we do begin a fresh journey together, it will be the right journey, it will be for the gospel. It will no longer be for John."

I don't know why I did, but I took off my coat and dropped it on the stage. I snapped up my Bible and walked out the auditorium, through the double doors. Hannah, one of our deaconesses opened the sanctuary door for me. Sam, my head of security opened the front door to the parking lot and began to follow. I shook my head 'No' at him, and continued to walk - alone. I drifted through the parking, down the sidewalk, and deeper into the city.

It could have been thirty minutes or three hours, I really can't say how long I walked for, nor did I care. But I eventually got thirsty.

Still clutching my large print, NIV leather bound 'preaching' Bible, I walked towards a gas station and into a mini-mart. As I approached the front door a voice stopped me short, "Excuse me, please?"

I turned to see a later-aged man with white hair and a desert camo army jacket standing with his hands behind his back. His bulbous nose betrayed his vice, but his steady and clear eyes gave me a reason to believe that alcohol was his only vice.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm sorry to ask, but I just need some help."

I shrugged, "What do you want?"

He was about to ask for something but then looked down, saw my bible, and shook his head, "Never mind."

"No, sir, please tell me. After the day I've had, you could ask me to buy you drugs and I wouldn't judge." I chuckled.

He laughed with me, "Ok, well." He looked away, "I was hoping for some cigarette money."

I started to say I was sorry and to give him the usual line about buying him some food or a drink, when that same warmth in my belly stopped me, "Just buy him a pack."

I smiled warmly, "Give me a minute." Two minutes later I emerged from the mini-mart with two bottles of water and the only pack of cigarettes I had ever bought in my life. I motioned him over to a picnic table and sat down. He sat across from me.

"I'm John, by the way."

"Bill. Thanks for the smokes, man. I know I should quit, but I'm trying to quit drinking right now, so I'm focused on one addiction at a time." He giggled nervously.

"Well, my pleasure to help, but," I shook the pack of cancer sticks at him, "I'll give you this pack on one condition."

He turned his face away slightly and eyed me with suspicion, "Yeah, what's that?"

I smiled at him, "Just tell me your story."

A grin grew on Bill's face as he leaned forward, nodding his head eagerly, a lone tear streaked his weather-worn skin, "Ya got yourself a deal!"

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