



Christianese

(a novel)

Chinasa Ugwuocha

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to

Sylvia Anatogu

of blessed memory.

You were a mirror of God's love to me.

Acknowledgment

Thank you [Fratee Media](#) for giving life to this book. You may never know how deeply grateful I am.

Realkemotina, God, not life brought us together and all that has happened in these past months mean a lot to me. Thank you for being who you are to me.

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Chapter One

Every one of us left the choir rehearsal that day boiling with anger. As for me, I decided never to come for any rehearsal again. In fact I decided I was done with the church, I would never step my foot inside it, not ever again. Even if my dead body was brought in, I will wake up, run outside and die back. I have never been embarrassed this way in my entire life. I was walking to the junction to take a taxi home when Mary stopped me.

“Sister Nnenna, please wait.”

I didn't want to, but for courtesy sake I just stopped, I didn't look back because I knew it was her, so I waited for her to get to where I was. All this Sister this, Sister that was going to end this night.

“Good evening Sister Nnenna.”

“Yes, good evening.”

“I have a message for you. I saw you wearing a dress while the prayer was going on; one part of it was white while the other was black. God is forgiving you gradually, once you get home pray more, seek for His forgiveness more and He

will change that dress to a completely white one”.

I tried not to talk and simply nodded. I was quick to tears and they were already banging at my eye lids, talking now would throw the doors wide open.

“It's a pity that you offended God this way”, she continued “How could you do such a thing? I thought as Christians, we know what the Bible says about such acts. Thank God that in His mercy He revealed it to Bro David for us to pray for you, who knows what would have happened to you?”

I was already crying. Who doesn't know what the Bible says about such acts, do I need this reminder? Wasn't the embarrassment enough already?

“Please let me go, I don't want to get home late”. I managed to say.

“Okay my dear, we will see tomorrow in Church and talk more about it after service”.

I just nodded and left. "Who is coming for your church service?"

I crossed the roundabout to the other side of the road so those still coming out of the church won't meet me standing there. I didn't want more questions and visions about me. They were coming in two's as usual, everyone talking to the other person- about me of course.

How could she do a thing like this? I could read the question from their faces. I prayed hard for a taxi to come and take me home before they got any closer. I had to start walking down the street.

I continued for some distance just to get away from the environment. Just then, Mrs. Ade drove past me, I knew it was her but I didn't stop and she didn't stop either. I usually joined her home after rehearsals and she would drop me off but not today, not after what happened. I didn't want to enter her car either; I needed to be saved from more questioning.

It was as though all the taxi drivers had a meeting not to ply my route that evening. It was getting darker and I was getting worried. Most of my choir members have driven past and none bothered to stop. Who will even carry an unholy girl in their holy car? That could mean contaminating the Holy Spirit.

“We don't tolerate such in our Church.” The Choir leaders' words echoed in my

ears. I held back the tears that were already blinding me. Finally, a car stopped, but it wasn't a taxi, it was an old friend.

“Good evening Nnenna, what are you doing on the road? Waiting for a taxi?”

“Oh Jide! Long time, thank God it's you. We just finished choir rehearsals and I am heading home, couldn't get a taxi at the church gate so I decided to walk down to the junction.”

“Please come on in, let me drop you off.”

Jide was my elder brother's classmate in school, we weren't really close friends but he knew me and he recognized me. He had been to our house to see my brother a couple of times.

I got in and we got talking. I didn't say much, I wasn't just in the mood. Yes, we had a lot of catching up to do but not this time. All I needed was to get home, have a cold shower and a good night sleep.

We talked about how we've been doing and he asked about my family. He invited me to his church; they have a programme the next day. When he handed me the flier, I saw it was a 3-day program tagged “*Who Buried My Placenta?*”

“Who cares?” I instinctively thought.

But I didn't want him to be offended so I just smiled and told him I won't be coming.

“It's just for tomorrow Nne, and it's the last day. I know you are in the choir and you will be in your church, but this program is very important. Today's service was powerful; you needed to see miracles and testimonies. You know, when they gave birth to you, you don't know what happened. Your placenta is a very important part of your life and destiny, without securing it, you can't move forward in life. Just imagine how we met today, I am very sure God sent me to you to bring you for this programme. This is a divine arrangement over your life to propel you forward.”

“Hmmm!” I wish I could just laugh out loud.

He went ahead to tell me how the devil goes about using his witch doctors in hospitals to tie people's placenta when they are born so that they won't go

forward in life. He went further to tell me that if I come for the program, the man of God would pray for me and discover where it was buried and deliver me. He also told me testimonies that people have shared in the previous days of the programme and how their Daddy in the Lord has a special mandate from God to discover all lost placentas.

I wanted to slap Jide at that point. How could he be so gullible? I was sure he didn't even know what placenta meant, let alone what they usually do to it after birth. I just kept quiet, I would have had a good laugh on a good day but not today, I just wasn't in the mood.

Though I was just five months in the faith, I knew better than to be looking for who buried my placenta. I thought Christians were supposed to be preaching to unbelievers and bringing them to Christ not moving them from one church to the other in search of their placenta. I almost said this; but I shut my mouth. I simply folded the flier and put it in my Bible. We were already close to my house and I was really grateful for the ride. He dropped me off and I bade him good night.

“Don't forget, it's by 8am tomorrow and I promise you it's going to be power packed. The address is on the flier.” Jide said as I got down from the car.
 “When will the program end?” I inquired.

“As the Spirit leads my dear. Don't worry about the time, once you sit under the anointing of our Daddy in the Lord, you won't even want to leave.” He replied.
 I just smiled and thanked him again for the ride.

“Good night, see you there.” He shouted as I made my way to the gate.
 I slumped into my bed and wished my Mom would come and give me a bath and then sing me to sleep. I wanted to start crying again as I remembered all that happened today. Just then my phone rang.

It was Pastor Jerry.
 Has he heard about it already? So soon!

“Hello Sister Nnenna.”
 “Good evening pastor.”
 “How are you my dear?”

“I am fine Sir.”

“How was the rehearsal today?”

“Fine Sir.”

“God bless you. I would like to see you tomorrow before service begins. Please be on time; we have some things to talk about before we join the Sunday school.”

“Sir, I...”

“My dear, it's very important and urgent.”

“I am sorry Sir, I...”

“You have to make it here and on time too. It's very urgent. I had even wanted to see you this evening, but was told you hurried away immediately after the rehearsal. Thank you Sister Nnenna. Do have a good night. See you tomorrow. “I am not coming anywhere!” I shouted into the receiver but the line was already dead.

As tears made its way to my throat, I wished he heard me, I was determined not to move an inch from my room tomorrow for any reason whatsoever. I will never go there again.

I was just beginning to find my feet in the Christian faith, but what I was seeing was very different from what I had read in my bible. I was very confused. I thought about my placenta, maybe Jide was right after all, something must be wrong with me... I cried and loathed myself. I thought God had forgiven me and cleansed me, but I felt the guilt all over again.

I must really need deliverance.

Chapter Two

I woke up the next morning not knowing what to do, I had prayed the previous night for God to speak to me and let me know He has forgiven me if He really has. I asked Him to call my name out loud and tell me how much He loves me or even tell me in a dream, if He couldn't speak to me audibly yet. But none of these happened.

Determined not to go anywhere, I neither went to our church nor did I go in search of my placenta (the program I was invited for). I just sat in my room and cried. I prayed, I sang and waited to hear God's voice, but nothing happened.

A knock on my door woke me up; I had slept off while praying. I looked at my wrist watch, it was already 2:30pm. I reluctantly went to answer the door. It was Pastor Emeka, our assistant Pastor.

So they have sent him to me to come and haul me to the church for further embarrassment. Maybe this time, it will be announced to the whole church and I will be stopped from coming to church. What more could they do? I thought. Though I was surprised to see him, I just stood there and said nothing.

“Sister Nnenna, please will you let me in? Good afternoon.”

He sounded like Jesus standing at the door of my heart knocking the way He said it in Revelations. There was just something about Pastor Emeka that was different. He was very different from the others in the church and I respected him, though I didn't know much about him but I chose to listen to him anyway.

We talked at length and I told him everything that happened. I was surprised at his response;

“Nnenna, there is something I want you to understand; God doesn't hold your sins against you anymore. The punishment was put on Jesus when he died on the cross; don't believe anyone that tells you otherwise. God is eternally in love with you. He now sees you through the eyes of Jesus, He sees you as Christ and you are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. Your sins have been forgiven and you are a new creature. That person who sinned is long dead, Christ now lives in you.”

He went ahead to make me understand God's love all over again. I couldn't believe it, it sounded too good to be true.

“God thinks you are holy. He sees you that way because of Jesus. He doesn't love you any more or less now. His love for you is perfect and eternal, it doesn't change with your feelings, it doesn't even increase when you do good, neither does it decrease when you sin. It's not like a pendulum swinging left and right with your acts or deeds. No, it's like a rock, a solid rock you can build your life and faith on. It is His commitment to you, He can't fail or falter regardless of what you do or don't do, and He will never change His mind. I wish I can make you understand this.”

His face was radiant with joy and the joy was palpable. He was aglow with God's love!

“Wow!” Was all I could say..

“The most beautiful thing is that His grace is ever abundant to ensure you don't fall into sin again.”

I was all smiles.

He encouraged me to keep coming to Church since I was not going there to

worship men but God. Most importantly, he instructed me to always study God's word so I can know Him for myself and know what He says about me instead of wallowing in guilt and self-pity.

I was overwhelmed with joy, by the time he was leaving; I was already laughing and happy. It was as if God really came and spoke to me, He was an answer to my prayers.

“Ok Sir. Thank you very much sir, you don't know what you have done for me today. I am really grateful, please don't mind me o, I didn't cook today, please manage this,” I said as I served him the coke and biscuit I had planned to eat for lunch. I didn't even mind, I was overwhelmed with joy.

“My dear, I am not a visitor, I am your brother. Please don't bother yourself.”

“No Sir...” I insisted.

I didn't mind giving him the snacks I wanted to take that afternoon. He stayed back to eat and I watched him eat it with so much delight. I didn't even know men of God used to eat, I thought all they did was pray and share the word of God. We talked more about family, work and life generally.

I felt so peaceful and renewed. I now had scriptures to fight the guilt that would come knocking and I needed to keep reminding myself of God's love.

“One last thing dear, I want you to forgive Bro David for betraying your trust. I apologize on his behalf.”

“But Sir, he is not even sorry, I confided in him and he promised to keep it to himself yet he said it was God that told him to say it. I don't believe him anyway.”

“Hmmm, my dear, the little I know about God, He doesn't like to bring us shame. I don't want you to see Him from that perspective; don't be moved by what people say He said, it matters less. What is important is what He has revealed in His word about His nature and we can see it clearly through the life of Jesus. It is unmistakable.”

“Hmmm, Sir I don't know what to do, I feel so betrayed and he hasn't even apologized.”

“You don't have to wait for him to, let it go. It may look hard but it's very possible. You have been forgiven so you can now forgive others. I am praying for you and I trust the Holy Spirit to help you and teach you more. There is a lot more.”

Pastor Emeka made the Christian walk seem like an interesting adventure, and I started loving it all over again.

“Thank you for giving me your time”. He said as he stood up to leave, “I will see you later.”

To my greatest surprise Pastor Emeka left without preaching at me for not coming to Church, I was thinking he came to scold me for being so rude and disobedient. It must really be true that God doesn't like to bring shame on us.

When I came back from seeing him off, I had 4 missed calls and a text message. It was from bro David:

I have been instructed to inform you that you are requested to come for a meeting with the church board by 5pm tomorrow. Be punctual.

“Mtcheewww”...I hissed and threw my phone on the bed. But then, I remembered Pst Emeka's advice and considered going. I just wished everybody was like him.

The conference room was a large air-conditioned room with a round table. It was well lit and the curtains were attractively flowered, I personally loved the orderly arrangement. There was a door at the other end written “Counseling Room”. It led into the room where one could meet with the Pastor for personal counseling.

There were also beautiful pictures on the wall of the room; the group picture of the church board members was conspicuously placed at the top corner of the other end. “The Lord's Holy Hill Assembly International” was boldly written on top of the enlarged picture frame.

There were also group pictures of the different unit members, each unit dressed

in their unique attire: the choir, drama wing, ushers and prayer team, they really looked like warriors. The women ministry, men ministry as well as the youth and the children group pictures were hung securely all around the top most part of the wall. It was beautifully arranged. The picture of the senior pastor and his wife was not missing; in fact it was the largest of all the pictures. The wife was truly beautiful, it confirmed the findings of my previous research and I instantly concluded that men of God always married pretty ladies.

The church board members as well as Bro David were seated in a round table and I was seated at the end of the room near the door leading to the counseling room which was where I was told to sit when I came in. The meeting had already begun before I arrived at the time I was given. I guess they started about an hour before the time I was asked to come.

The Senior Pastor welcomed me and asked Bro David to go ahead and speak:

“Now that she is here,” Bro David began. “When I had that vision about her, I knew instantly that God wants us to take immediate action. Not everybody must be a part of this church, we have a special holiness mandate from God, and it's for only a selected few—those who can pay the price. If you can't, hmmm I don't know what will become of you. As for me, I have been living a holy life ever since I joined this ministry. The worst part is that she is even a member of my unit. As worshippers, we are the people that are expected to uphold the banner of holiness unto the Lord, but look at what she has done.”

“So what immediate action are you suggesting we take?” Pastor Jerry asked.

I was still looking around when Pastor Emeka spoke:

“Sir, I have spoken with Nnenna extensively and she told me everything that happened. She is just a new convert and this incident happened before she gave her life to Christ. We can't be judging her based on her past life. I believe God has forgiven her and we should do the same. She has repented and forsaken those ways.”

“How do we know she has forsaken them?” Pastor Jerry, the senior pastor interrupted. “Sexual immorality is not something that one can let go of easily in a space of 6 months, there is a hold it has on the individual. What about the baby

she killed? She has blood on her hands! You see, Pastor Emeka, this ministry was given to me directly from God to raise a holy people, condoning this act will contaminate the others. It will spread like wild fire. Sin is very contagious; you don't understand the gravity of this act.”

“But what about the blood of Jesus?” Pastor Emeka continued, “She has the blood of Jesus on her hands too, all over her body. We must not forget that she is the reason Jesus died and she is now a new creature in Christ. Which of us did not ever sin in our life? Yet God forgave us, I think we should...”

“It's ok Pastor Emeka”, Pastor Jerry interrupted, “Nnenna, please kindly wait outside; we will call you in after some minutes.”

I stood up, head bowed and walked outside while they debated over my life.

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Chapter Three

I was glad to be outside now, away from those hurtful words and hateful glances. I just sat there and waited.

In a flash, I remembered all that happened. It started after I completed my membership class; Bro David called me and encouraged me to join the work force of the church. I loved to sing and worship God so I decided to join the choir, when I met Bro David later and told him, he welcomed me and asked me not to hesitate in letting him know if I needed help with anything. He offered to mentor me.

During one of my meetings with him, he kept asking me questions about my past life and insisted I answer them because according to him, God needs to uproot my past in order to brighten my future. He also said that by sharing it, I would be obeying the scripture that says '...confess your sins one to another' but that if I kept hiding them, then it would mean that I haven't been saved from them yet. I believed him and trusted him with all, even the details. He promised never to tell anyone, but did just the opposite.

I told him about Frank, the guy who got me pregnant while we were dating, though he promised to marry me, but he wasn't ready to start a family yet and he convinced me to have an abortion. He also took me to an expert because according to him, he wanted a clean job that will not affect our ability to have kids when we were married. Frank broke up with me three weeks after the abortion; he said it was over because he wanted to focus on building his life and career.

I was devastated and I felt so used, that was when I realized that he just wanted to clean up his mess and dump me by insisting on the abortion. Though I objected to it, but he smooth-talked me into it and swore to marry me in a few years' time when he must have made the money, he even gave me a ring. I believed him, something I now regret; it has always been my weakness. That was the same way I believed Bro David when he promised to keep our secret, but now I know better. I have been so naïve and gullible.

While saying the closing prayer at the end of rehearsals the day after we spoke, he began saying that God instructed him to pray for me. He called me out and began to pray for me.

“I feel this strong urge for us to intercede for the life of Sister Nnenna, the devil is seeking her life and we won't let that. Since she came into this church, the holiness church, the devil has been after her because of what she did. Let's pray, pray brethren!” They all started murmuring prayers, asking God to forgive me.

“Brethren, you don't understand, that's why you are still praying like that”, he continued. “I don't want to go into the details but let me give you a little information; maybe that will help you pray better. The sin of sexual immorality is a grievous one and the Lord detests the hand that is swift to shed innocent blood, brethren lets plead God's mercy over her life.” That was when they began to shout on top of their voices asking God to have mercy on me while I knelt down and fought back the tears, bewildered.

The whole scene played back in my head like it was happening all over again; it reopened the wounds of my heart and body that were beginning to heal. Frank had left me just when I needed him most; I was still recovering from severe pains and discomfort resulting from the abortion. The guilt and shame was also taking

its toll on me and hurt even more than the physical pain. Now, when I thought I had found forgiveness and refuge in God, He was revisiting my past, leaving me with doubts and questions about His grace. Maybe my sin was too grievous after all, maybe I needed to pay for it in a way and maybe I needed to be put to shame in order to understand the gravity of my offense and how angry it made God feel.

God doesn't like to bring shame on us.

Pastor Emeka's words re-echoed in my head.

Just then, Mrs. Ade broke into my thoughts.

“Good afternoon Sister Nnenna, please did you see my husband anywhere around here, he is not picking my calls?”

Mrs Ade was the wife of Deacon Adejumo, one of the Deacons. She was a notable member of the church known for her outspoken nature and strong devotion to the ministry. She was a strong voice in the women wing of the church; everyone always wondered why she wasn't made the women leader. She had the charisma and carriage of a leader and she carried that aura everywhere. She was fondly called Mrs. Ade.

“Yes ma, he is inside. They are having a meeting.”

“I know about the meeting but it's taking too long, I thought they would have finished by now, I didn't think it will take this long. I have been waiting for some time now. Meanwhile, what did they tell you?”

“I don't know yet ma, I was asked to wait outside briefly, and I am still waiting.”

“Okay. I just wish they will obey God and carry out the necessary disciplinary actions. Justice must begin in the house of God, sin cannot be allowed to grow and thrive. I pray God will help them to take the right decision. My dear, I have been praying for you and I know that the will of God will be done.”

I just nodded my head and said nothing.

She paced up and down for a while. Few minutes later, she left.

“Let me go get some groceries, I guess I will be heading home from there since the meeting is not yet over. I will send him a text.”

“Okay ma. Bye.”

“Bye.”

I was really exhausted by now. I kept wondering how all these people got to know about my case. I imagined how many more knew and what they were saying at my back.

“Father, please I am really sorry, how many more times do I have to say it?”

For a second, I thought about leaving, just walking home from here; after all I came by myself. By the time they are done, I will be gone. I didn't understand why I was being made to go through all this humiliation. I thought of even leaving the church and staying on my own.

“Lord, I will leave for good, I was thinking your salvation was free but I see that I must have to pay a price. I don't know if I can pay the price.”

I was lost in my thoughts when Deaconess Chioma came to call me in.

“Sister Nnenna, you may come inside now.”

“Thank you ma”.

I walked in and she motioned for me to take the empty seat beside her. I didn't want to look at anyone's face, my mind was already prepared for whatever they would say but I still felt very nervous. It was like I was in a law court, sitting before the judge and my accusers. I wondered if I had any attorney standing in for me.

Pastor Jerry began after clearing his throat.

“Sister Nnenna, I must say that this has been a tough decision for us. Though I

was disappointed that you could do a thing like that and still keep coming to the presence of God, I still chose to give it more thought and prayers. I know this may be hard for you, it is even harder for us but we must do the needful, I am really sorry that we have come to this conclusion, but just know that all we are doing is to protect the image of this Church. We still love you and we will keep praying for you. We do hope you find a place to continue to serve God, but here, we can't condone sin..."

"Sir, this is so wrong! Pastor Emeka broke in "This is not what Jesus would do. How else do I explain to everyone here that God has forgiven her and we should do same? I will keep saying it that I am not a party to this decision."

I have never seen Pastor Emeka so angry before and it pained me that I was responsible for it.

"Nobody said God has not forgiven her, we all know that. All we are saying is that we cannot condone sin, we can't let it under our roof, in the body of Christ." Pastor Jerry affirmed.

"What about the adulterous woman? What about the tax collectors?" Pastor Emeka asked; still fuming.

"Didn't you notice that they didn't go to the extent of shedding innocent blood? That was the height of it; she took matters into her own hands and took the life of a baby who contributed nothing to her sinful lifestyle. If we don't punish this, then how do we continue preaching the message of holiness God has entrusted into our hands?" Pastor Jerry answered back.

"Oh my God! Pastor Emeka screamed. I can't believe this! I can't believe we have been sitting here arguing over this matter for hours and I still can't figure out when we became the judge of men's lives. Sir, please I beg you in the name of God, let's not do this."

I could feel the compassion in Pastor Emeka's voice.

“I am the senior Pastor of this church and my decision stands. Nobody is judging her; we are only doing the needful. You were not there when God called me and you have no clue how He specifically warned me about this. I will not disobey Him”.

The look on Pastor Emeka's face was that of anger and frustration mixed with love and compassion, one could see how hard he fought to keep his calm.

Everyone was silent for what seemed like ages.

Deacon Iliya was the one who broke the silence.

“Sir, excommunication will be an extreme measure, why don't we go with what Deaconess Chioma suggested earlier on, let's give her two weeks suspension instead. We can watch her within that period and if she shows signs of repentance we will restore her. That is how it is done in my parent's Church.”

“Deacon Iliya, this is not your parent's church, don't ever forget that! Pastor Jerry said, almost flaring up.

Deacon Adejumo cut in; “Sir I think I agree with him. The suspension will still pass the message to the other members; let's not take an extreme measure that we will regret.”

Pastor Jerry was visibly torn in between his ego and the opinion of his board members.

Bro David spoke “Daddy Jerry, I agree with you but since we are having this contention, let's go back to the bible. The Bible says clearly; 'come out from among them and be ye separate'. It's unwise to pamper sin. I think we are on the right path.”

“I wish you understood half of that verse you are talking about”. Deacon Kanu retorted.

The atmosphere was really getting uncomfortable, there was tension everywhere and I could feel the heat.

“It's ok, everyone. Since we have been unable to come to a conclusion and it will be unfair to send her outside again or adjourn the meeting, let's do what they do in the National Assembly, we will vote. Everyone tear out a piece of paper, write 'suspension or excommunication' and pass it down to me.” Pastor Jerry instructed.

I waited for them to bend and write but all eyes were on me, at that moment I prayed for the ground to open up and swallow me so I could get some shelter.

4

Chapter Four

I kept struggling with the big bag I was carrying till I got into my apartment. I regretted not letting that barrow guy help me out when he offered to, but it wasn't really my fault. I had no extra money to pay him; all I had was the money for the *keke* driver who would bring me home. The hike in price of food stuffs and other commodities meant I would be spending more to get fewer things and my tight budget wasn't even helping matters.

I have been dying to have a plate of coconut rice and today was just the best time to make it a reality. It was Saturday and since I wasn't going to work, I decided to devote plenty of my time to shopping and preparing the rice.

I quickly unpacked my bag and changed to a more comfortable house wear. I have a habit of playing music while cooking or washing and again, this was a good time. Everything seemed to be in place and I knew I was bound to have a great time that afternoon.

And a great time it was!

Food was ready and the aroma filled the room, I could almost bet my neighbours

were salivating. The plantain I fried sent the message that my coconut rice left off and it was just perfect to drive home the point. I quickly sat on my bed and *leveled the mountain* that was before me. I wasn't a slow-eater so the heap went down faster than it imagined. I did justice to the meat and smoked fish I used in preparing it and it was like a dream come true. After eating, I had no choice than to give the Lord a sleeping offering as a token of my gratitude for a day well spent; this I did with all pleasure.

And the next thing that followed was a deep sleep!

Except that I had many dreams, I know they were about eight different scenes. I just kept moving from one place to the other. How could one have so many dreams in a short nap and be unable to remember at least one vividly? I lay on my bed thinking, trying to get a clue, any scene at all that meant something, anything. But none came, so I got tired of thinking. I just let it go. The song on my phone was still playing; it was 'Pieces' by 'Amanda Cook' the new song I downloaded the day before. I had my way with lyrics so they came very easily and I sang along with her:

*Unreserved, unrestrained, your love is wild,
 Your love is wild for me,
 It isn't shy, it's unashamed
 Your love is proud to be seen with me
 You don't give your heart in pieces,
 You don't hide yourself to tease us
 Uncontrolled, uncontained,
 Your love is a fire
 Burning bright for me
 It's not just a spark, It's not just a flame;
 Your love is a light
 That all the world will see
 That all the world will see
 You don't give your heart in pieces, you don't hide yourself to tease us
 You don't give your heart in pieces, you don't hide yourself to tease us
 Your love's not fractured,
 it's not a troubled mind
 It isn't anxious*

*It's not the restless kind
 Your love's not passive
 It's never disengaged
 It's always present
 It hangs on every word we say
 Love keeps its promises
 It's keeps its word
 It honors what's sacred
 Cause it's vows are good
 Your love's not broken
 It's not insecure
 Your love's not selfish
 You love is pure
 You don't give your heart in pieces,
 You don't hide yourself to tease us*

As I sang, I felt God's love all over again. But now, it was beyond my feelings, I knew it deep inside my heart that indeed God loves me and He doesn't like to bring me shame. That got me on my feet dancing and rejoicing. It made all the difference in the world. I didn't even worry about the fact that I was banned from coming into the church; the place where I was felt like heaven, I was right in the presence of God in my room.

It was as if my playlist was duly informed of the songs I needed to hear at that moment; they followed one another in quick succession. Israel Houghton's '*Your Presence is Heaven to Me*' was followed by '*No Longer Slaves*' by Bethel Music. When Jesus cultures' '*Your Love Never Fails*' began, I couldn't hold it back anymore. I let the tears flow freely:

*Your love never fails, never gives up, never runs out on me
 On and on and on and on it goes, it overwhelms and satisfies my soul
 And I will never ever have to be afraid, one thing remains
 In death, in life am confident and covered by the power of your great love
 My debt is paid, there's nothing that can separate my heart from your great love.*

I had a priceless moment that I didn't want to trade for anything. It was like I was being carried by God in His arms and His love was poured into my heart. I didn't

even know the day was already far spent till my neighbours' daughter, Princess came knocking on my door.

She was a sweet, little 7-year old cutie that had become a great friend and we were getting fond of each other. Her parents, Barrister & Mrs. Bright were young couples who I admired and respected, and they lived peacefully in the neighbourhood. Princess had bid me farewell in the morning as she left with her school bus for a picnic organized by their school to mark the end of the session. I teased her to bring something for me.

“Aunty Nnenna, I am back”, she called out to me while knocking persistently on my door.

“Alright dear, I'll be with you in a moment.”

“I brought something for you, open the door.”

I hurried to wipe my face and get the door.

She ran in and hugged me tightly.

“Aunty Nnenna I enjoyed myself today.”

“Wow, welcome darling. I can see that your face is radiant and your dress is all shades of sand and ice cream, *play play* girl. Oya, tell me about it.”

“Yes aunty. We went to Zenith parks and gardens and also went to the mall. I entered the pirate ship; I was so scared when it started moving that I kept screaming, even our Aunty in school that was holding me was scared too and screamed.

“Hahahaha”, I couldn't help but laugh.

“Then, I and my friend Grace danced in the dancing competition and I won. I was the best dancer.”

“Wow! That calls for celebration.”

“They gave me extra ice cream and popcorn and a chance to ride the roller coaster with our Proprietress.”

“Ok dear, I will come during your children's anniversary. Hope that's ok by you?”

“What about tomorrow. Will you be going to your Church?”

“Emmmmm... Yes, No, Not really.” I stammered.

I couldn't tell Princess about my suspension, she wouldn't understand. I had planned to go and look for another place of worship this Sunday. I hadn't been to any Church in the past two weeks and I really wanted to go Church hunting to check out other places of worship and possibly join one, if I see any that I like.

“No dear, but I will be going somewhere else.” I finally replied.

“Where? Please Aunty Nnenna, come to my Church tomorrow, we have our bible recitation challenge tomorrow and I will be part of it.” She pleaded.

“Ok, dear, let me think about it. I will come to your house to greet your mum before I go to bed, then I will give you my answer, you have to go now so mommy won't be worried”

“Thank you Aunty. Bye!”

I watched her go and I felt a ting of emotion welling up within me. I loved Princess and I knew she loved me and always meant well for me. She was so young and naïve yet her love was pure, strong and unconditional. I loved the way she loved me. Could it be God showing me how much He loved me through this little girl?

...this love is so great that you will never see the end of it or fully understand it. Eph 3:18

My heart was gladdened to know God still loved me and that no matter how anyone else showed me love, it was just a tip of the iceberg, nothing compared to the one He has for me.

It was now three weeks after my suspension and though it was meant to last for two weeks, I still hadn't heard from my Pastor. Not even Pastor Emeka had called since then. Could it be that they won him over to their side or was he

“Wow, I am proud of you sweetheart. You are really a Princess!”

“I brought my popcorn for you.”

“Awwww, thank you hun. I really appreciate you. We will eat it together over that our movie; *Alice in Wonderland*. Hope you still remember”.

“Yes, you promised me that I will watch it after my exams, even *Cinderella* and the *Barbie* series.”

“Yes my dear, we will see all of them together, thank God we already have popcorn.”

We laughed some more, as though the popcorn would stay till then.

“Let me go and have my shower, my mummy said I should bath before going anywhere but I begged her to allow me see you just to give you what I brought for you.”

“Awww... that was so thoughtful of you dearie. Bye, we will see later. Just go and have your bath and rest well. Thank you so much.”

I felt like an angel just gave me a gift from heaven.

“I made coconut rice for you o, I would have given you to eat now but I am sure you have had your fill for the day. I will keep yours in the fridge; when you come back from Church tomorrow, I will warm it and fry your plantain for you.”

“Ehen Aunty Nnenna, when will you follow me to my Church? Our Aunty in church is very nice and you will like her, remember I told you her name is also Aunty Nnenna and she is nice like you.”

“Hahaha Princess, you are very funny o. Even if I follow you to church, I will be in the adult church; you know I won't follow you to the children's department.”

“Yes, but you will still see her after the service, she used to go to the adult Church when we dismiss.”

banned from calling me. I was really worried and imagined that they had finally decided to let go of me, maybe I didn't look repentant or God spoke to them as usual to cut me off completely. I wondered if it was the same God that was still showing me His love every day. But I stayed with my suspicions and refused to believe any of them.

I still wanted to go back to my Church, but now I decided that since they didn't want me, I will find a new place.

I almost forgot to go and check on Princess as I promised; she must have been expecting me. I quickly hurried off to their apartment, I was sure she would be glad at my decision and I could imagine the excitement on her face when I tell her I will be following her to their church. But when I got to her house she was sound asleep so I just greeted her mum and made enquires about the time they would be leaving for the service. She was glad to hear I'd be joining them though she still wondered why I would leave my own service knowing I minister in the choir. I simply told her that Princess invited me and I didn't want to turn it down.

“Thanks for leaving your church to join us, I know you are very devoted even in the choir and I know this will be a huge sacrifice for you to spare one Sunday and worship with us. God bless you dear.”

“Amen. Thank you ma”. I didn't need to give her any details.

The church was a small one, more like a family Church. There were very few young people; many of the members were elderly and middle-aged people. I enjoyed the service though I had to leave at some point with Mrs. Bright to go and watch her daughter's recitation challenge at the children's department. She did excellently well, she was just a bunch of brain and beauty and I envied her mum. She even recited scriptures I wasn't very familiar with and I felt so proud of her. She was given a Bible as the winner and we took pictures too.

When we returned to the adult church, the message was almost over. I just heard the Pastor encouraging them to stand firm in the face of challenges. When it was time to welcome the first timers, I was reluctant to stand up at first; I feared that my life would be bugged with text messages and calls afterwards. But Mrs.

Bright gave me that look that dragged me to my feet, exactly the same thing my mum would have done. I reluctantly stood up and said my name when the microphone got to me. We were taken to a special place for further information and refreshment; the part I really liked. They gave us a form to fill and a free gift of one of the Pastor's books.

Princess and her mum spent some time catching up with other families while they waited for me. Mr. Bright was out of town for a conference so it was just the three of us, and we drove off.

“Nne, hope you enjoyed the service?” Mrs. Bright asked.

“Yes ma. I did, very much.”

We went on to talk about Princess' performance and we couldn't stop praising her. When we got home, I thanked them for having me and bade them goodbye.

While I made my way to my room, Princess stopped me to ask:

“Aunty Nnenna, since you enjoyed the service will you now be coming to our Church all the time?”

I was startled by that question. I just turned and smiled at her and she giggled.

I wished I had an answer.

5

Chapter Five

“Stop that driver pleaseee, look at what he has done.” A woman cried out.

The driver was already speeding off. It was obvious he did it on purpose and didn't want to stop; all efforts made to get him to a halt didn't pay off as he had zoomed off. The woman was left there with her little children; one on her back and the other beside her, about 4 years old.

Some passersby waved for him to stop, others just stood and looked, trying to understand what just happened. There were only few of us that knew what had transpired in a matter of seconds. I just stood there stunned and speechless; I wondered how someone could be so heartless.

“Madam, sorry. What happened?” A man stopped to ask.

“Stupid man! Idiot! Ole! This Christmas, you want to kill my son for your ritual, it will not work for you. Onyegwu ego!” She said, referring to the driver that had zoomed off while ignoring the question.

People were gathering gradually, everyone was asking the other, what had happened.

“My God is alive; he will never let me be put to shame. The devil is a liar; your plan will not succeed. It will never work for you; it will not be well with you...”

She went on and on raining curses and abuses on the cab driver.

“Madam it's ok. Calm down, what happened?” another passerby asked.

“That stupid man almost killed my child with his useless car. I don't know where he is rushing to, that's how he will drag others with him to an early grave.” She continued.

Her little boy was still sitting on the floor, crying. He had fallen down in shock but thank God he was unharmed. I reached for him and carried him. The baby on the woman's back began to cry too... Talk about brothers' love.

The woman continued her story; “That man is wicked, I asked him to drop me in front of the primary school close to that Zuma road junction, he refused and continued driving, I kept telling him yet he refused. He now dropped us here when he noticed I was beginning to call out for help and as I was coming down with my child, he didn't even wait for us to alight properly; he sped off, almost knocking down my little boy. Who knows what he wanted to do with us this Christmas period?”

People had gathered at the scene. Everyone tried to calm her down, telling her to thank God for the safety of her life and that of her children. The lady who followed me from the salon was helping to pack some of her things that had scattered on the floor, while I tried to make the boy stop crying.

Just then, someone tapped me from behind.

“Nnenna?”

I turned, I was stunned! “Good afternoon Sir.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I'm just coming out from that salon I went to make my hair.”

“Oh Lord! God is good. I have been praying and wishing to see you. I was going home and decided to take this route so I can meet my vulcanizer who stays across the road to pump my rear tyre that was slowly going down. While he was at it, I saw some people gathering and decided to check what was happening and here you are.”

He looked really excited to see me.

“Please, I am really sorry. I lost my phone and I couldn't get to you. It was just the day before yesterday that I got a new one. I came to your place thrice but didn't meet you on any of the occasions. I am really sorry.”

“Ok sir. No problem.”

“Please forgive me, my excuses are lame. A letter was supposed to be delivered to you; I don't know if you got it?”

“Letter? From who? I didn't get any?”

“Really? That's serious. I am sorry about that too. It's a letter from our Church calling you back to continue worshipping with us. I co-signed that letter with the Senior Pastor and we gave it to Bro David to deliver it to you.”

“I am yet to get any letter Sir.” I said sounding a bit defensive.

“Alright, how are you doing? How have you been? It seems like ages to me now”.

“I have been alright.”

“Please let's get to the car so we can talk more.”

I gave the little boy back to the mother, she was already set to go and Pastor Emeka offered to give her a lift which she declined since her house was not too far away but he insisted that she joined us in the car so that he will take them back to where they were meant to stop. We all got into the car and left. People were gradually dispersing too, everyone muttering abuses on the driver and thanking God for saving the little boy.

“Sorry Sir that I didn't call.” I said as we drove off. “I was afraid and didn't know what to do. I thought it would be an offence to call.”

“No dear, I should be the one apologizing; we shouldn't have left off on a bad note. All the same, thank God I met you today. We can go to my place to have dinner, I am sure my wife prepared something nice and she would be glad to have you spend the evening with us.”

“You don't need to bother sir, I ate before leaving home.”

“That must have been a long time ago. I insist. It's also an opportunity for you to get to know my place and my family.”

“Ok, thank you Sir.”

We dropped the woman and her kids off and headed to Pastor Emeka's house. She was glad and thanked us.

It was a bungalow well-furnished and decorated. Pastor Emeka had a decent and comfortable home, the peace was palpable and the atmosphere reflected the joy in his house hold. His two little boys Joel and Japheth ran out to welcome him.

“Welcome Daddy.” They both greeted.

“Thank you my soldiers. How are you guys doing? What about Mummy and your sister?”

“Mummy is in the kitchen and Ruth is sleeping in her room.”

I didn't need to ask why he called them his soldiers, Pastor Emeka always talked about his two boys and the strong men they were growing into. While preaching, he would tell us stories about them and refer to them as his soldiers.

“Darling, you won't believe who we have here.” He called out to his wife as he headed for the kitchen and motioned for me to have a sit.

“Welcome Darling, who could it be?”

“Come and see for yourself.”

She came out and exclaimed on seeing me.

“Wow! Sister Nnenna we have been looking for you all over the world. Welcome my dear.” She said as she gave me a warm, motherly hug.

“Thank you Ma.”

“Exactly what I was just telling her.” Pastor Emeka said.

“How come? How did you two meet?” She asked him.

“I ran into her along that Zuma road today, a crowd gathered near my vulcanizer's shop and I went to see what was going on, and behold, there she was in their midst helping out a woman who a cab driver almost ran over the son.”

“Heyaaa, hope the boy wasn't injured?”

“No. I don't think so.”

“The best part of the news is that she was right in front of me and I almost didn't know until I looked well and recognized her.”

“Thank God. You are welcome my dear, how have you been?”

“Fine Ma.”

“We are really sorry about all that happened. You are most welcome to our place, this is your home and you are welcome here anytime.”

I was elated, they made me feel wanted and at home. We talked more about what has been happening in Church.

“Thank God today is Friday, I will just call Pastor Jerry now and tell him that you will be with us in the meeting tomorrow.”

He called Pastor Jerry and they spoke about me.

“Sister Nnenna, though we decided to keep your suspension within the church board, we still need to dissolve it officially. It will be done within us instead of the whole church so no need for church announcement. It will not take more than 15 minutes after which you are free to go. Then you may now come to worship with us anytime, you will be free to sit anywhere and participate in all church activities without restriction.”

I didn't want all that meeting with church board, I hadn't forgotten my last encounter with them. I even wondered if it was that necessary. I tried hard not to show my displeasure.

“Meanwhile, where have you been worshipping all these while?”

“I haven't really been going anywhere for some time now, though last Sunday I followed my neighbor to their church.”

“Sorry about that, I have personally missed your presence in our services. I am glad to have you back.”

I didn't know what to think, I still had doubts about going back to that church, not with all their plenty drama and rigidity. Besides, I imagined how people would look at me and point fingers. What if someone asked me about what I did or mentioned it again? I will probably flare up and give them a piece of my heart.

It was as if he read my thoughts.

“Don't worry about what people will say, I strongly believe God has planted you here for a reason. I will see to it that nobody brings it up ever again.”

Hmmm... I wondered how he intended to do that.

Pastor Emeka's wife treated us to some good delicacy. She made white yam and egg sauce with freshly prepared orange juice. I was glad to be part of that dinner. We ate happily and he couldn't stop commending her top notch culinary skills, it was true after all.

After the meal, Pastor Emeka reassured me that everything will be alright, he also told me how he believed that God had a purpose for letting all that happened and He would use it for my good and His glory. I thanked him as he dropped me off and bade me goodbye.

“Goodnight Sir.”

When I got to my room I kept thinking about the meeting and Sunday service too, I still had mixed feelings. Seeing those faces again, saying 'hi' to them, what if I saw Bro David and he tried to talk to me? What would I say? I knew deep down that I hadn't let go, I didn't want to either. I resolved to stop worrying and let the events unfold. With that, I gave in to the waiting arms of sleep, my good friend.

It was another Sunday service; the hall was packed to the brim as usual. The usher led me to a sit at the right side of the hall. I sat down and bent my head to mutter some prayers as was my custom, though I always didn't say anything but it has been that way since Sunday school days in the children department: anytime you came into church, you bowed your head in prayer.

As expected the air conditioner was on point and the sound was just too good, nothing had changed. Besides, what major changes was I expecting to see in a matter of few weeks?

When I raised my head, the Pastor was saying something like “Turn to your neighbor give him a handshake and say: Neighbour, welcome to Church, I am happy to be seated next to you this Sunday morning.” I turned to my neighbour and behold, it was Frank.

I reached out to shake him, but my hands stayed still. I was about to tell a lie...

**onyeogwu ego* means Ritualist.

6

Chapter Six

Frank looked more charming than ever, he wore a pair of double denim jacket jeans with a polka dotted black and white inner shirt. I remember I made that pick for him when we went shopping sometime ago; my love for polka dotted dresses was unequalled. Frank knew how to do *effizy* with a matching muffler anytime he wore denim and this one he has on now is everything in the word 'classy'.

My eye caught his new pair of black men's suede boots, I guessed it was the Clarks' original men's desert suede boots he once told me about...awww they were gorgeous. The scent of his designer perfume sang to the butterflies that lay still in my stomach and they quickly rose up, flapping their wings in adoration and leaving me with goose bumps and mouth wide open. I wasn't surprised he still had that effect on me. I have always adored Frank from the very first day I met him and longed for a life time of 'happily ever after' with him.

My awe of how handsome he looked was soon submerged by the hurt and pain he had caused me. The memory came back suddenly, leaving me with a sad feeling of love mixed with bitterness and rage. How could one look like an angel, yet act like the devil? I managed to force a smile.

“Neighbour, welcome to Church, I am happy to be seated next to you this Sunday morning.” He repeated what the Pastor asked us to say while squeezing my hand gently.

I shook him rather quickly, muttering something I can barely recall and we both took our seats. He sat down calmly and adjusted the pair of goggles he had on. Was he really happy to be sitting near me or was I the only one about to go nuts at such unprecedented sight? He appeared relaxed and composed as though he didn't even notice it was me. I wondered if he recognized me. The service continued in the usual manner, though I could neither keep my mind still nor my head up. I didn't pick a thing the pastor said except the rhyme he kept repeating throughout the sermon.

“God is able to conquer your trouble and give you marbles for all your rubbles.”

Almost everyone in church must have written it down as he kept singing it over and over again. I was still trying to really understand what it meant when Frank stood up to leave at the end of the sermon. I assumed he stepped out to take a call or something, but he didn't come back. I didn't know whether to be happy or sad. I kept straining my neck to see if he was standing outside but he was nowhere in sight. Though I was more comfortable with his absence, I was worried that he didn't even say a word to me.

Just then, a young lady, one of the ushers tapped me from behind.

“Sister, please someone asked me to give you this”. She said, handing me a small piece of paper.

I was about to open it when I stopped to ask:

“Who?”

“A young man outside.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I was getting nervous as I opened it and read the note:

“Nnenna, it's good to see you again after a long while. I kept my tabs on you and found you here. I am glad you took care of the mess properly and you are doing fine. I will see you soon, we need

to talk.”

Love, Frank.

I folded it quickly and almost ran outside to give him a piece of my heart. But I sat still and tried to keep my cool.

We said the grace at the end of the service and it was followed as usual by the Lord's Prayer; I rushed through the lines but got stuck towards the end:

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us.”

The words stayed in my mouth and clogged my throat, I could hardly breathe.

How can I forgive when they haven't even asked for forgiveness? When they don't even care about what they did and how it hurt me?

I have been tending and feeding my hurt and it kept growing bigger, it made a lot of sense to hold them in the prison of my mind and keep them locked there forever. I was really having a hard time letting go. Not Bro David, not Frank. Not after what they had done, not after the pain, hurt and shame.

Worse still, Frank has come back now to mock me and open wounds that were beginning to heal. How could he? How could he dare to scorn me and hope to get away with it? He must have thought I was a fool. How could he just show up like this and act like nothing happened between us? I was thinking he would at least say he was sorry, but he only came to mock me and rip off the layers of my healing wounds. He was really taking me for granted and I needed to prove to him that I am no longer the cheap, naïve and needy girl he used to know. It was time to retaliate and make him pay dearly; at this point I cared less what the Lord's Prayer said.

I was surprised to be seeing my mum's call on a Monday morning. She usually called me on weekends and we chatted about all the events of the week. But she didn't call last weekend and now I really feared something bad had happened, I quickly answered the call.

“Nnedim” as she fondly called me. {Nne dim} means my husband's mother, it was my native name.

“Yes Mummy, good morning Ma.”

“How are you doing my daughter?”

“I am fine Ma. How are you and everyone at home?”

“We are all good. We are really missing you o. Sorry I didn't call during the weekend as usual, I was very busy. You know Ekene and Dera went back to school yesterday so I was shopping and preparing them for the new term.”

“No problem ma. I miss you guys too but I'm fine. So they have gone back now? It's good so that you can rest a while. How is Daddy?”

“He is fine o, He is here.” “My Love, your mother is greeting you.” She said to my dad. I was named after my Dad's mother so they were fond of calling me his mother.

Nne m, my Daddy shouted from the background. We don't hear from you again, how have you been?” He said as my mum handed him the phone.

“Daddy, I'm fine. Good morning Sir. I was just asking about you. Hope you are ok?”

Yes o, *ofuma nu*, very well. Your mum is taking good care of me. What about you?”

“Daddy I'm very fine, don't worry about me, I am doing great.”

My talk with my dad was always brief as we didn't have much to talk about; it was rather cold and formal. He would ask me about work and how I was coping, and I would simply reply that all was well. In a matter of seconds, I was back with my mum.

“Nne, there is something I want to tell you. I have been having this feeling that all is not very well with you. Is there any problem?”

“No ma. I am very fine.”

“*Idikwa* sure? Are you sure? Yesterday, I had a bad dream about you, I saw you struggling with a lot of baggage that kept you at one spot. You were carrying so much and you were also trying to walk but they were so heavy that you couldn't move, and gradually they were about to fall on you and crush you. When I woke up, I began to pray for you and I felt led to tell you to yield yourself to God, let go of any load you are carrying because God wants to use you. Do you have any idea what those loads may be?”

“No ma”. I didn't want my mum probing into my life and finding out things I have hidden so well all the while. I was already afraid she would use her spiritual gift to discern what was going on.

“I will pray about it more in other to be clarified.”

“Okay my dear, I will keep praying for you my daughter. You are a vessel in God's hands and the devil will not stop your destiny. God will use you mightily.”

“Amen. Thank you Ma.”

“You are blessed my daughter. Have a beautiful week.”

“You too Ma.”

“Bye my daughter.”

“Bye Ma.”

7

Chapter Seven

Running away from reality was one thing I was very good at. I kept telling myself that all was well even when I knew deep down that it wasn't. The more I thought about all that happened, the deeper the hurt I felt, so I decided to sweep everything under my breath and bury them there.

I had become hardened towards God and His word, I was growing cold and distant and it pained my heart even more. I loved God and wanted to obey Him but it was becoming very difficult. Worse still, a part of me wanted to hold on to the hurt and pain even when it was eating me up. My heart was filled with resentment and malice. I knew it was wrong but I just couldn't bring myself to the point of completely letting go.

Pastor Emeka's wife called earlier in the day requesting that we meet at her place in the evening, she said she had some things to share with me and that we also needed to talk. I had some free time in the evening so I thought it was a great idea and looked forward to it.

When I closed from work, I headed for her home after I called to confirm she was around. In few minutes, I was seated in her house as I waited for the house

help to inform her that I was around. I learnt she had just returned from work and went in to have a quick shower.

Mrs. Peace Emeka Ibe was one of the few people I still admired and respected. Even though I hadn't had much contact with her in the past, she looked approachable and friendly. I tried to guess what we were to talk about as I looked round the beautiful and well-arranged living room. I hoped I didn't have to wait too long to ease the suspense. I felt a bit nervous since it was my first time of having a one-on-one conversation with her.

Shortly afterwards, she joined me in the living room and apologized for keeping me waiting.

We exchanged pleasantries and for the next 30 minutes, we had the most amazing conversation I have had in a long while. She told me about her experience, she was raped at 13 by her uncle, yet she had to forgive him and let go. I was so shocked that all I could do was stare at her as she told me how God's love conquered her heart and won her over. I wished I could say the same; but my heart had become so hardened that I wondered if there was any hope for me.

“When you don't forgive people,” she continued, “you keep them in a self-made prison and the sad thing is that you have to stay there with them to watch them and make sure they don't ever get out; that way, you have imprisoned yourself too. I must confess that letting go is not an easy thing to do especially when you keep seeing the person. Everything in you would want to fight back, but true peace and freedom comes when you forgive.

I remember those days after I gave my life to Christ; I was just a young girl like you, I was 21. I had carried the hurt for 8 years and when God asked me to let go, I refused because I wanted revenge. I wanted God to punish him but instead God asked me to pray for him. Can you imagine that? He wanted me to pray for a man that raped me! It was so difficult because my uncle never even felt sorry rather he warned me never to tell anyone and even bragged that if I dared to tell anyone, they wouldn't believe me because they held him in high esteem; they would never believe he would do a thing like that to me. He also threatened to deny it and even kill me.”

“Oh my God!” I fumed.

“When my husband came along 2 years later, it was a big issue for us and almost wrecked our relationship because I held on to the hurt and saw all men as evil; I battled with low self-esteem, rejection and unforgiveness. He kept talking to me, showing me the love of God and praying for me until one day, few months later, I listened to a message a friend gave me, I can never forget that day; 22nd of July. It was a beautiful Saturday! I sat in my room and wept all day.

That was the day I let go. I surrendered my hurt to God and forgave my Uncle completely; it's still one of the most beautiful days of my life. The heavy load I had carried for years was taken away from me. I felt light, peaceful and loved like never before in my life. I knew boundless joy and true freedom.”

At this point, I couldn't hold back the tears anymore; she lent me her shoulders and pulled me close to her bosom.

“It's so difficult Ma, I have tried. I have prayed and fasted but I can't, I feel so angry every time I remember it. Why is God allowing all this in my life?”

“My dear, God is at work in you both to will and to do His good pleasure; what He commands, His grace enables us to do. I totally understand you dearie and I have been praying for you. This is what we have been called to do as Christians. Remember how Christ loved and forgave us before we even realized we had sinned. Forgiveness is a free gift we have received from God and must continue to give freely to anyone who hurts us whether we think they deserve it or not; that's what Christ did for us. I would like us to pray together now. He helped me, and I know He will help you too.”

With that, she held my hand and the next few minutes were my most precious moments of surrender. I cried, I wept loud and hard, I don't know for how long but she just let me. She prayed for me in words I didn't understand and soon, I heard myself praying in other tongues too, though it was strange but I let them flow.

It was like God's presence enveloped me, I felt all my hurts, pain and anger melt away. I felt light, really light and yet full of energy. I was kneeling on the floor by the time we were done praying, she was still holding my hand and encouraging my weary heart. At that moment I knew I had let go, I was filled with overwhelming joy.

“Nnenna, it is done! I sense a note of victory in my spirit and now, you have been filled with the Holy Spirit. I am so happy for you. Now you can pray in other tongues and have limitless fellowship with the Father. When you go back, you should pray in the Spirit more often and build up your most holy faith. Glory to God!”

I nodded my head as I stood up, a new person, refreshed and filled with new strength.

“Also, you must keep declaring God's word because the devil is going to come back to make you doubt and feel guilty. He will bring back memories and hurts, but you must stand on God's word. Now that you have been filled with the Spirit, you must continue to study God's word and let Him speak to you; the Holy Spirit will reveal Jesus to you more, listen to Him daily and let Him do His work in you.”

“Okay Ma.”

“Now you will promise me that you will pray for Bro David and Frank and next Sunday you are going to walk up to them and speak with them. If you want me to be with you, I will be glad to do that. Is that ok by you?”

“Yes Ma.” I said willingly.

“Meanwhile, you are always welcome here anytime and don't forget to call me if you need help with anything. Let me quickly prepare something for us to eat and also for my husband; he must be on his way home now. You can join me here.” She said as she led me to the kitchen.

Chapter Eight

“Hello babe, hope you still remember our meeting tomorrow, you're coming right?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Okay, see you then.”

“Bye.”

“Bye dear.”

Frank hung up and I quickly called Pastor Emeka's wife to tell her about my meeting with Frank and she said it was ok.

I arrived at *Chips and Chats Plaza* at about 5:10pm. I sighted Frank already waiting at the far end of the restaurant, he waved at me and I walked down to meet him. The eatery was a relatively small one, though exotic, it looked expensive. Everyone was busy talking to someone and they all seemed to be having a good time. Frank gave me a warm welcome as he pulled the sit for me to sit down.

One of the guys at the restaurant wanted to propose to his girlfriend and invited his friends; there were lots of cameras and people were taking selfies too. This made the place a bit loud and lively. They cheered at them as the girl blushed

when he popped the big question. She said "YES" and he slid the ring into her middle finger, she really looked happy and excited. I didn't know I was smiling at them when Frank cleared his throat.

"That smile really looks good on you; you should wear it more often you know." He teased.

"Are you saying I don't smile very often?"

"No, not at all. I am just saying that this one is special, I'm sure you know what I mean." He laughed.

"I don't know what you are talking about." I giggled.

We talked and laughed some more. I couldn't believe I was talking and laughing heartily with a guy who had caused me so much pain.

"It's really good to see you again after what seemed like ages. Please pardon my manners, what will you have?" He asked.

"I'm fine, thanks. I will probably grab a soft drink on our way out. I don't want to eat anything now."

"I insist. You can't come here and only take a bottle of soft drink; you have to eat something. I will have chicken and chips with a glass of fresh orange juice and I will order same for you."

The waiter was already standing by to take the order which he quickly went to bring.

"I actually came into town some weeks ago; I came to church because I really wanted to see you. I am sorry for how I left that day, I knew you were mad at me and I could feel the heat of your anger while we sat there. Nnenna, I am so sorry for what I did, I was naïve and afraid then. I still love you very much and I want us to be back together again.

"These past days without you have been unbearable, I don't want to continue living without you, I can't. I think about you every single moment of my life, you

know we've had so much together that letting go is almost impossible. I am a changed person now and I want you to give me another chance.”

I don't know what got me confused at this point, it was either the sweetness of his voice or the manner in which his lips moved while he spoke or even the look of repentance in his eyes, I was speechless. *Another chance for what?* Did Frank bring me here to ask for forgiveness or to ask me to marry him? It had better not be. My heart was betraying me again and I didn't want to be bitten by the same ant twice because I was gradually melting like a teen shot by cupid's arrow.

Holy Spirit, please help me.

He stopped for me to talk and gave me that irresistible look but I tried not to make anything out of it.

“Frank, I have forgiven you. I am not mad at you anymore. But as for us getting back together again, I'm sorry it's not...”

“Don't say that yet,” He cut in “I know you are still angry, you should be. Please you can take it out on me; you can shout, scream or even beat me. I deserve it. All I'm asking for is a chance to make things right and treat you like the queen that you are.”

Kneeling, he held my hands gently and the warmth of his palms sent shivers down my spine “I love you Nnenna, I really do.”

“Stop, Frank!” my heart was already in my stomach and it was beating too fast. I tried to catch my breath as I fought against the strange emotions welling up within me. “*No, Nnenna, not again*” I said to myself.

Nnenna, get up and leave

As I made to shake him away, he drew even closer raising my hands to his face and gently, he planted a kiss on my palms.

Oh my God! It felt so good.

He raised his head and reached for my face, he drew my head closer with his hand and his lips were moving closer to mine. I was sinking into his arms when the voice came again.

Get up and leave

My heart heard it but my head wanted to enjoy the moment.

“Emmm, sorry Sir, the orange juice is not yet ready, I came to inquire if you don't mind waiting for about 15 minutes, my colleague is working on it or I could offer you pineapple juice instead, that's what we have now.” The waiter interrupted.

This must have been an act of God; I thought to myself or was it mere coincidence?

Frank was taken aback and he felt a bit disappointed as he regained his composure.

“It's ok, you can bring it.” He said calmly, trying to hide his frustration.

“I think I should go now, Frank. It's getting late.” I cried.

“Ye—s, I think so.” He stammered. “Wait please, let's stay some more maybe we could talk while the waiter brings something for you.”

“No, thanks; I'm leaving now. Thanks for having me.”

Walking out of that restaurant seemed like moving against the tide, everything in me wanted to stay back, to be in his arms. My feet were heavy but I dragged them still, wondering if I did the right thing. I didn't bother turning to say goodbye because I knew the look on his face would make my heart soften so like a flint, I set my face a thousand miles ahead.

The next few days of my life were life-changing; I avoided Frank's calls and didn't reply his messages. I was growing deeper in my walk with the Holy Spirit

and I didn't care about anything else but Him. Every moment, I knew I was in His presence and it made all the difference. I anticipated the Sunday service more than ever; I began to see it as a time to fellowship with God and with other believers rather than a weekly ritual that must be fulfilled by all Christians. I began to understand that I have a part to play in the body of Christ because I am a member of His body. I am loved, accepted and called to serve alongside other believers so I looked forward to doing this in anyway God would lead me.

It was Sunday and I was seated in Church, the service began in its usual manner, it was good to see everyone again. We sang and danced heartily as the praise and worship filled the hall. Everyone seemed to be lost in the Spirit and very eager to go deeper or was I the only one feeling this way? The assistant Pastor, Pastor Emeka finally came upstage to lead us in a round of prayers. We prayed for our families, the Church and the country amongst other prayer points he raised.

When it was time for the Choir ministration, they marched to the altar from where they were seated near the pulpit. They wore a turquoise blue shirt with a red rosette for the ladies and red tie for the men and a navy blue skirt/trouser. I missed the choir, I missed the people and I missed ministering with them too.

Sister Mary was the soloist. She stepped out in her usual manner with the microphone in her hands as she faced the congregation. I couldn't take my eyes off the high heeled shoe she was wearing, I guessed it was more than 6 inches and I prayed she wouldn't fall. Her well fitted skirt and long sleeved shirt had no hard time covering her tiny body so as to give her that sisterly look.

“Lift your hands unto the Lord Brethren, it's another beautiful Sunday morning and we are glad to be in the sanctuary and not in the mortuary. Clap your hands and give God a shout of praise.”

We all obeyed. Who wouldn't? She spoke with a sweet and polished accent.

“The Lord has been good to us and that's why we are here to give Him praise. You know our life is a miracle, a living, breathing, walking, talking miracle. If you know you are a miracle jump up and give the Lord a big shout.”

"Yaayyyyy!" A thunderous shout echoed in the hall.

They scored the song very well just like Anthony Brown, the singer. Everyone was on their feet jumping and singing:

“I am a living, breathing, walking, talking, moving miracle...”

“Greater is He than what you see, if you need proof; just look at me...etc”

After the rendition, the moderator gave a wonderful speech on how awesome the choir is and jokingly said that our Church choir will be the one to minister in heaven; everyone shouted "Amen!"

It was time for the message. The moderator came forward to introduce the senior Pastor.

“Brethren we have come to the most important segment of this worship. With a standing and shouting ovation, let us welcome God's man for the now; the only man of God who heaven invites to the heavenly council meeting to decide on matters pertaining to your life and mine. He is here again today to make known to us the outcome of Heaven's council meeting. You see, we don't know what God has done for us in this church by giving us a man like this; a man after His heart. With a shout and a thunderous clap please welcome our Daddy, Prophet Jerry Anointed Elijah.”

Everyone echoed a thunderous shout as Pastor Jerry came forward, the usher that was carrying his Bible placed it on the pulpit.

He quickly adjusted his 6-piece navy blue suit with a broad smile beaming on his face. Pastor Jerry was a handsome young man with a beautiful wife and two lovely children.

“Brethren, I'm very excited this morning, who is as excited as I am?”

People were still clapping, shouting and carrying up their seats. The band also continued playing the last part of the song the choir rendered and the back-up singers sang softly in the background.

“You may sit down brethren. Today, God will be speaking to us again from His word; you know when God wants you to move further in life He gives you a word for your warfare and welfare.”

“Word Sir! HmMMMM!” The brother sitting on the next row shouted as he stood to his feet.

Another fellow at the right side of the hall screamed, “Ride on Sir!”

As the sermon continued, other people shouted different exclamations ranging from “ride on Pastor!”, “I hear you sir!” “chuck me word!” to speaking in tongues very loudly anytime he made a sentence. There was barely any line he finished that wasn't followed by an exclamation from someone in the congregation. Sometimes they completed the rhyme even before he began.

This distracted me greatly, I simply wished they would keep quiet and allow us hear the word of God. I desperately wanted to be fed with God's word; my heart was very hungry and expectant. I longed for something more, I honestly did.

Chapter Nine

The choir was asked to wait behind for a brief meeting after the service so I rushed to greet Bro David before he would begin addressing them. When I greeted him, he simply ignored me and proceeded to greet other brethren that were waiting for him. I was surprised but I decided to assume it was an oversight; I told myself he was probably very busy or his mind was on something else and he didn't hear me. So I waited outside the hall while they had the meeting.

After about 15 minutes, they started trickling out of the hall in two's and three's. I said "hi" to most of them as I stood by the door waiting for his turn to step out but they replied coldly. Again, I wondered what had happened to the once friendly choristers. I stopped Sister Esther who used to be my sit mate in the alto group. She was the lead alto vocalist. She just said "hi" and begged to leave saying that she was rushing off to someplace; though I understood her reasons, but it was quite unusual.

As the choristers dispersed gradually, some stopped to exchange pleasantries while others took *selfies* with their friends in front of the beautiful church building. Still, others sat at one corner of the hall to exchange their high heeled shoes for a more comfortable flat slipper before heading home.

Bro David still wasn't out. I guessed he was meeting some other people so I decided to go in and let him know I was waiting. I sighted him talking with Sister Tola, the choir treasurer. It was not unusual to see both of them together after service as the duo were good friends, though there were gossips here and there about the two but I thought it best not to assume things that I had no business with. He was holding her closely as they sat together at the far end of the hall, I tapped him gently.

“Good afternoon Sir. I'm sorry to interrupt; please can I see you briefly. I was greeting you earlier on, I guess you didn't see me so I decided to wait for you and I have been waiting for some time now.”

“I didn't see you.” He mumbled with a look that suggested otherwise. “But as you can see, I'm with someone and we are having an important discussion. Please wait or you can go if you are in a hurry, we can always see another time.”

“Ah ah, Bro David. That's not fair, please let her see you.” Sister Tola protested. “I can wait, besides I think we are done with the major things about changing the signatories to the account, I can brief you on any other development over the phone or during midweek service.”

Turning to me, she continued. “Sister Nnenna, please don't mind him. I was about leaving before you came, so feel free.” She stood up to take her leave.

“Tola wait.” Bro David held her hand to refrain her from going while rising to his feet.

“No, Sister Tola don't bother, it's not urgent.” I cut in. “It can wait till next Sunday or I can send him a text. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.”

“Fine, Tola, please just give us five minutes, I'm sure it will be brief. I have some other important things to discuss with you and I would love to drop you off.” He pleaded with her.

“It's ok.” Sister Tola replied. “Let me say 'hi' to Aunty Peace before she leaves.”

I pulled the sit beside me and sat down, and he joined me. I couldn't talk for what seemed like ages. The hostility was palpable and all I could do was pray under my

breath, I wondered how the once sweet and friendly Bro David had suddenly turned sour.

“Yea, you said you wanted to see me. Here am I.” He spoke first.

“Yes Sir. Actually I came to apologize for everything that happened. I am really sorry and I want you to know that I have forgiven you and I hold nothing against you. I was angry and bitter towards you, but God has changed my heart and I no longer hold anything against you. I believe we are Christians and we shouldn't be bearing grudges against one another. I...”

“Hahahaha” he interrupted with an annoying laughter. “So you have been bearing grudges against me all this while? Hmmmm.... Well, I didn't know. Thank God your conscience started pricking you to speak up. As for me, I don't bear grudges. I always maintain a clear conscience and a clean heart before God and man. Anyway, I have heard you. Is that all?”

“Yes, thank you Sir . How have you been and how is the choir?” I asked dryly, a bit reluctant to continue the conversation.

“We are doing excellently well as you can see; everyone is in high spirits. Wait, is this an act you put up to get your way back into the choir?” He scorned.

“No, not at all.” I was surprised. “I just wanted to make peace, that's all.”

“Ok then, peace it is. Any other thing?”

“No, that's all. Thanks for listening.”

“Ok, Bye.” He stood up to leave.

“Bye Sir.”

I hurried out, a deep feeling of defeat and humiliation gripping me. I literally felt like a fool but at the same time I was filled with overwhelming joy knowing that I had just obeyed God's injunction to pursue peace at any cost.

As days rolled into weeks and weeks into months, I began to feel an unexplainable burden for the Church. This was triggered by some recent developments in my church that had become a source of worry to me.

Every week came with one trouble or the other. There was a lot of drama, gossip, disunity, hatred and bitterness in the church. Though the crowd grew bigger, there was an air of discrimination between the rich and the not-too-rich, the spiritual and the not-too-spiritual and many people came to church just to show-off and go through the motions. There was one bout of quarrelling after the other and these things bothered me a lot.

The other day, I heard that Engr. Patrick took Bro Silas, another church member to court for not repaying the money he lent him and the court issued an ultimatum for Bro Silas to pay up or face trial. Engr. Patrick had threatened to put him in jail and Bro Silas was selling some of his properties to raise the money. The court case raised a lot of dust and mouths were wagging already. Some condemned him for taking a brother to court while others saw nothing wrong with it stating that it was the only way he was sure of getting his money back.

There was also this other side talk about some members of the youth wing who were agitating for removal of the youth leader on grounds of mismanagement of funds. People said all manner of things and it was hard to know what the truth was.

Little disputes were springing up every day and many were being poorly handled. My heart was heavily disturbed every time I went to church. People were always seen in groups after service discussing the latest happenings, giving their opinions and arguing who was right and who wasn't.

Recently, they began forming cliques, almost everyone belonged to one clique or the other and they looked down on anyone who wasn't in their circle. What pained my heart the most was that the Pastor seemed oblivious to all that was happening, there was no mention of it or call for prayer about any of these matters or even a measure set in place to address them, rather what we focused on was the building project that the church had at hand.

Pastor Jerry had come one Sunday and announced that God was moving us to a new place to build a magnificent, state of the art, worship center in the heart of the town. He said God gave him a vision to build a 5,000 sitter capacity auditorium and he would do anything possible to make sure the land was purchased and the building completed as soon as possible. He also said that God

instructed him to tell us to give all that we had until we were broke because He was about to rain down fresh showers of blessing on us and he needed our pockets to be “very empty” to be able to contain the incoming blessing.

That day, he encouraged people to give up their school fees, house rents, children's school fees and all that they had because according to him, “God is in need of your Isaac. You must lay him down so that the house of God can be built. This is what is called sacrificial giving and until it pains you deeply, you have not given to God.”

People made pledges, they gave all they had and some even went as far as pledging their next month salaries, he called this group “the dangerous sacrificial givers.” There were different categories; those that pledged their children's school fees and house rents were called “the Faithful seed sowers.” All the different groups had special prayers made for them based on how much they could sacrifice and 'lay on the altar'.

I didn't want to make pledges since I wasn't good at keeping them, so I joined the last group “the small-scale investors”, the group that gave whatever they had on them at the moment. We were just about five and no prayer was said for us, he simply asked us to drop our '*widows mite*' into the offering box and return to our seats while he prayed for the other categories after they filled the slip that was given to them.

This led to another quagmire in the church; when we came to the church the next week, we heard a sad story. One of the deacons, Deacon Cosmos had a fight with his wife and he beat her so much she became unconscious and was rushed to the hospital. On that fateful day, she had requested for some money to buy food items and other things they needed in the house but he told her he didn't have any money. When she pressed further, He told her he gave all their money to the church as a seed for the building project.

According to him, he expected her to understand that he was doing the work of God, but instead, she began nagging and complaining and said she wouldn't cook any food. She was mad at him for not seeking her consent before giving out all their savings. This led to an altercation and he flared up and landed her some good blows. He called her names and said she was a devil that wanted to distract him from doing the work of God. She was still lying unconscious in the

hospital when the news spread all over the church. That was when everyone was asked to pray for her quick recovery.

After this incidence, I didn't know what else to do but pray. I also embarked on a personal study of the book of Acts of the Apostles. I decided to read through in order to know what church was like in the bible days. I was amazed at all the things that characterized the early church; the love, unity, oneness, power, miracles and even the persecutions. I wondered why things were so different in my own church; it was the exact opposite.

I started nurturing thoughts of leaving the church to a church that looked more like the one I read about in the book of Acts. I wondered if they still existed and if my church could ever become like the early church.

One morning, as I picked up my devotional to study, the topic was: *The Triumphant Church*

Scriptural reference: Eph 5:27

...that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

When I saw this, I knew God was up to something!

10

Chapter Ten

As things grew from bad to worse I decided to visit Aunty Peace, Pastor Emeka's wife to talk things over with her and let her know about my plans of leaving. The thought had consumed me for days and I needed to talk to someone and since she always lent me a listening ear, she became my number one confidant. After I explained my reasons to her, I was amazed at her response. She had a good laugh and began telling me:

“I know this may sound impossible but I want you to believe with me that God is set to do a mighty work in our Church. There is going to be a great outpouring of God's Spirit and we are going to experience the love of Christ afresh and be united like never before.”

I wished she would stop sounding like the old prophets in the bible and face reality. Instead, she continued her sermon:

“God is not coming to rapture a weak, dying church but a triumphant church, a glorious church, one radiant and full of life, holiness and love. My husband and I have been praying for a long time now and I believe God has heard us, that's why he is stirring hearts like yours to seek Him to bring His word to pass in no distant

time. I specifically prayed last month asking God to place a burden in someone's heart and here you are, an answer to my prayers.”

I was surprised, yet determined to go ahead with my decision.

“Ma, you don't understand, everyone seems to be lost in their own ways even those we least expected. The church is now like a market place, a place of entertainment where people come to show off with no real relationship with God. This is far from the triumphant church you are talking about. Can't you see all that is happening? There are just too many things wrong with our church, the members are always quarrelling and gossiping, people snub others and segregate among themselves, the message is far from the type Jesus preached.

We just go there, get excited and go home with no real transformation. Every time I go to church, I leave unsatisfied and sometimes even drained and empty. I feel it's better I go to where I will be blessed, somewhere I can worship better and feel God's presence. I don't feel it in our church anymore, I don't even like the Pastor again, his messages are one-sided, it seems the anointing upon his life has finished. The other day, I heard that...”

“Shhhhhh...” she interrupted, motioning for me to keep quiet. “My dear, there is no perfect church on this earth. Remember, the church is the body of Christ and no matter how flawed it is now, God is about to sit upon her like a refiner's fire to cleanse and purge her before the rapture. You shouldn't speak against the body of Christ; Jesus loves her and purchased her with His own blood.

“Meanwhile, who is this church we are talking about here? It is you and I; we are the body of Christ, so you are actually speaking against yourself. See, running away is never a solution; you will only run into more troubles. That church you are admiring from a distance and want to run to, has its own imperfections, every church does. That's why we are here; to bring in the measure of grace that God has given us and use it for the building up and edification of the church, not to criticize her and tear her down.”

She spoke with so much certainty and passion that her words were beginning to convince me. I had to put up my defenses and not give in so easily.

“Ma I know all these, but it's not like I am leaving for the wrong reasons, I only

want to go to a place where I will be blessed.” I insisted.

“I know, but have you considered how you can be a blessing? You should be looking for where you can be a blessing to other people as well. We are all members of Christ's body; we need each other to accomplish our God given assignment. Just as I said before, I believe God is stirring your heart because He wants to use you for a great work. He wants you to be part of the coming revival. Don't give in to the devil's lies; he only wants you to miss out on what God is doing by running to a different place. Trust me when you get there, you will begin to see all their imperfections and begin to run again.

“That's how you will keep moving from one church to the other in search of what can only be found in heaven. We are here to make earth become like it is in heaven. There is this prayer journey my husband and I embarked on; we have been doing it for some months now. Every day, we take out a certain portion of our time to pray specifically for the church, we use scriptures to pray and enforce God's will.

“We don't just pray for our local church alone but also for the body of Christ as a whole because like I said earlier, it's not only our church that has faults, I have heard of worse things happening in other churches. There have been a lot of discouraging news, but we will not relent or give God rest until He shows us mercy and pours forth righteousness upon us. We also entered a treaty, a kind of agreement with one another never to speak against the Church or speak ill of it.”

"You see, your words are very powerful, in fact your words are prayers, God hears them too. When you are busy praying for someone, you should not speak ill of him at the same time, it will be counterproductive. You remember that place in the Bible where God promised to do unto His children as He heard them speak into His ears. That's exactly what we are doing: speaking His words back to Him.

“We don't want to join the devil and accuse the bride of Christ. We don't want to use our tongue to spoil our prayers by speaking ill things into the ears of our Lord. We hear of all that is happening and take it to the Lord in prayer reminding Him of His word and promise to make His bride spotless and glorious. I want you to join us in making this pledge and prayers.”

“Hmmm... I really wish I could. You make it sound so simple but I have

already spoken many bad things about the church countless times, I doubt if God can still use me for anything serious.”

“Nnenna, God says “If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray, I will hear from heaven and...”

“I know that ma,” I cut in, “What I am saying is that I... I don't really know if God can still use me with all that I have done, you know *naa*. You know I have history. I know God has forgiven me and cleansed me, but use me? Hmmm, that looks like asking for too much.”

She smiled at me and lovingly explained to me for what seemed like the 100th time how God doesn't remember our past sins anymore and how He has not just forgiven but cleared the memory and it's like we never did such things. I really felt bad that I could drift into guilt and shame so easily despite the tons of love God has poured into my heart. It seemed like I needed a constant reminder and I silently asked God to forgive me and help me not to make light His grace and call it insufficient.

“There is no need to shy away my dear.” she continued. “We were born and preserved for a time like this, even if we refuse to let God use us, He will raise other men to accomplish His purpose on the earth and we will only be spectators. I don't want to be a spectator. I don't know about you but I want to be a part of what God is doing.”

She pulled her Bible closer and opened it.

“There is this scripture I have been ruminating on for some time now, Eph 5:25-27

...as Christ showed to the church when he died for her to make her holy and clean, washed by baptism and God's word; so that he could give her to himself as a glorious church without a single spot or wrinkle or any other blemish, being holy and without a single fault.

“When I read it, I almost doubted it because of the things going on presently, but God impressed it strongly on my heart and that's what we have focused our prayers on for the past four days. No matter what I see, I believe God's word; He

has said it, He will do it.”

“Wow, that's the same scripture I came across in my devotional few days ago, it has stayed in my head since then” I said, visibly shaken. “Hmmm, does that mean God is saying the same thing to us?”

“Yes, He is. The choice is now yours my dear, either to let God use you to build up the church or to allow the devil use you to tear her down by your words and prayerlessness and even fear.

“Hmmm, devil use me?”

I dreaded the very thought of it and would want no such thing.

“I'm in ma.” I blurted out. “I will begin to pray and speak prophetic words in line with God's word concerning our church and the church as a whole. I will join in the prayers.”

“That's my girl, I always knew you had a heart for God and I have not stopped praying for you since I met you. Together we will make the will of God happen on earth as it is in heaven.” She reassured me, her face lit with so much faith and hope.

We said few words of prayer and she went ahead to urge me to encourage other weary hearts I may meet.

“Let the Holy Spirit lead you, not everyone will agree with these things I shared with you, but I am persuaded about them and we must not relent. Some may even try to talk you out of it but don't give in. The truth is that God doesn't need to use everyone, He just needs few men whose hearts are willing and available and He will work wonders through them.”

“Thank you very much Ma , I don't know what I would have done without you, I would have been running from one church to the other and neglecting the assignment God has for me here.”

“You wanted to become Mrs. Jonah abi.” she teased.

“Hahaha,” we echoed the laughter as she saw me off.

I left her house with an unflinching resolve to yield myself to God for His use and devote myself to the building up of God's bride and the advancement of His kingdom.

My phone beeped:

Baby, please can we meet. I am really sorry about last time; I promise it will never happen again. Love, Frank.

Oh Lord no, not now. The last thing I need now is a distraction.

11

Chapter Eleven

Determined for the last time to call it quits, I dialed Frank's number but he didn't answer. I tried it two more times and he kept busying the call. Few seconds later he called back.

“Sorry babe, I didn't want to burn your airtime so I decided to call you back. Hope that's ok by you?”

“It's ok. I got your text.”

“Good evening, how are you doing?”

Did he have to remind me that I forgot my manners? Frank always liked to claim to be a gentleman and rub it on everyone's face.

“I am fine and you?”

“I am well, just that I have really missed you. I meant every word in that text.”

“Well, I called to tell you that it won't be possible to see me. I am very busy with a lot of things, work, Church and my personal walk with God. I don't want to engage in anything that will distract me from...”

“So I am now a distraction? But you said you had forgiven me, Nnenna?” He was flaring up.

“Yes, I have. God knows I have, and I am not calling you a distraction, all I'm saying is I can't see you.”

“Really? I thought you said God had changed your heart and you were a new person now, yet you ignored me all this while despite all my pleas and my efforts to make it up to you. I thought...”

“Stop Frank! Playing mind games with me won't get us anywhere. I have made my point clear; I decided to say no to ungodly relationships so that I can focus on my walk with God.”

“There she goes... sister Holy Mary! Ride on, go ahead and call me names. First it was 'distraction', now it's 'an ungodly fellow', a sinner. I have seen you dear righteous one; the holy Mary who took the life of an innocent child. Who could ever believe you would do a thing like that only to come now and claim *holynweje**. You have also forgotten that you owe me an apology for killing my child, yes, you do. I haven't even come to that, I was hoping we could make it up to each other thinking you were reasonable, but how foolish could I be?”

“Now you turn your back on me and call me a sinner when you were the one who threw yourself at me like a spoilt child. You have forgotten those days when you were needy and I was there for you. Those nights when you would lie to your parents just to be with me, you would cry and fall asleep in my arms. You never thought about sin and distraction any of those times. Or, you think I have forgotten? No, never! You bitch! Wayward and shameless, you have the guts to call me a...”

“Goodbye Frank” I ended the call and quickly removed the battery from my phone, my heart pounding and my hands still shaking.

That was all I knew to do to restrain myself from the anger boiling within my soul. Frank dug up dirt I had forgotten and even called me a bitch, a shameless one at that. “O Lord, I should have known that it would come to this.” I cried and wondered how many more times I would have to be dragged back into this mud to eat the fruits of my past. I was completely discouraged and felt dirty again, I deserved everything he said to me.

I should have kept my faith to myself in the first place and dismissed the illusion that by boldly declaring my stand, I would be firm and shut Frank out of my life, but no, I fell like a pack of cards and felt so defeated. Frank knew how much words got to me, he knew he could use them both to get me and to pull me down and he has been a champion at both.

Not wanting to bother Aunty Peace anymore, I kept all that happened to myself. The day she asked about Frank, I replied that he was doing fine.

“I saw him in Church the other Sunday, why did he stop coming?” She insisted.

“I really don't know Ma.” I quickly answered, trying to avoid the topic. But being a mother, she noticed my uneasiness and asked if Frank still disturbed me. I nodded coldly, refusing to give her the details. She simply said I should ignore him, I wished it was that simple.

I drowned myself in my work and didn't bother much about prayers for the church any longer since I was a big, recurrent failure in spiritual matters and couldn't maintain my pace. Even though Pastor Emeka and his wife still continued with the prayers and sent me text messages and scriptures to pray with, I only mumbled few words and hurried off to the office every day.

One of those days, I was less busy at work so I picked up the book I have been reading “The Happiest People on Earth” by Demos Shakarian. I had slipped it into my bag while racing off that morning, hoping to steal few minutes and read a chapter or two. Just then Fatima, the youth corper who was posted to serve in our office walked in and saw the book I was reading.

“Wow, Inenna (as she usually called me in her Hausa accent) who are the happiest people on earth?”

“You will find out if you read the book.” I answered coldly not wanting any distraction. “Don't worry, when I am done I will give you to read, though it belongs to our Pastor's wife but I am sure she wouldn't mind.” I added realizing how harsh I sounded earlier.

“Just tell me *naa*, since you are reading it already.” She replied still trying hard to get my attention.

“It's actually a story about the life of the man Demos, he was a farmer in...”

“Just tell me who the happiest people on earth are, not the story of the book.” She pressed on.

“Ok, they are those who do the will of God and please Him.” I said, dropping the book and facing her.

“What is the will of God and how can I do it?” she asked with so much interest I was stunned. Fatima was a devout Muslim and the last thing I wanted to do at work was to start a religious argument.

I remembered how on my resumption day my boss had warned me that since we were all people with different religious beliefs working together, I must stay away from religious arguments and stick to work-related discourse to avoid conflicts.

She was already seated beside me and it was just the two of us in the office at that moment. Looking into my eyes, she repeated the question with a tone that suggested she was desperate for answers. I didn't know if I was 'equipped enough' to tell her about Jesus, all I could see in her eyes was sincerity and desire that sprang from her deepest heart and drew the words out of my mouth.

“The will of God is that we all be conformed to the image of His only begotten son Jesus Christ. I don't mean to contradict your faith but the truth is that we cannot be happy in life if we don't believe in the Lord Jesus and receive His life into us.”

I went on to tell her how sin separated man from God and about the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection to reconcile us to Him. I told her that Jesus is the only way back to the father and the hope of eternal life. Her face lightened and she continued asking other questions that led us deeper into talking about God's love and His desire for a personal relationship with her. I was amazed at how easily she yielded.

She told me how she longed to experience God's love and please Him by praying regularly and observing all she was taught from birth to do in order to please Allah. She was burnt out and tired of the performances and wanted genuine peace and freedom. We prayed a simple prayer of salvation and I led her to Christ.

To my greatest surprise, she received Jesus into her life. I assured her that I would be available to help her grow in her new found faith and she couldn't stop thanking me.

Later in the week, I took her to Pastor Emeka's place, though secretly because she didn't want her friends to know about her conversion. She feared they would quickly tell her parents and the consequences would be dire. Pastor Emeka told her that she would face a lot of persecutions when she goes home but assured her that God would see her through. He gave her a new Bible and encouraged her to study it and pray to God in the name of Jesus. Aunty Peace took special interest in her and began taking her on regular classes where she was taught the fundamentals of the Christian faith which will help her grow. I took her for the lessons and benefitted from them too.

We also planned to meet at my place to study the Bible and pray together once a week. I was thrilled and challenged by her love for God and passion to know Him. One day she told me, “Inenna, I wish I were you, I wish I knew Jesus before now, I wish I was raised in a Christian home. You people are enjoying so much joy, freedom and peace. I really wish my family will come to know Jesus and experience this joy, I don't know what will happen when I get home. If you know little about my religion, you will understand that this can lead to being disowned by my parents or even a death sentence and though I feel so much newness, peace and joy, I am really afraid. My father warned me about this before I left home for NYSC, I don't know what to do.”

I reminded her that God would shield her from harm and even give her the grace and boldness to share her faith with her family. We also began to pray for their salvation.

She told me that she had never been to a church all her life and hoped to join us one day, even if it meant disguising herself since everyone around knew her religion.

I still struggled to believe that God could use me to show his love to Fatima despite all my shortcomings. The simplicity of it amazed me even more. Though I had read few stories of conversion but it only happened through mature and very spiritual believers and usually after much prayer and fasting, yet God chose to use me when I hadn't done any.

I began to understand why the Bible said that we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the Excellency of the power may be of God and not of us. 2 Cor 4:7

I knew that only God could have done it.

**Holy Nweje* is an Igbo language slang used for describing people who have a 'holier than thou' attitude.

12

Chapter Twelve

I reluctantly reached for my phone; it was ringing for the third time now; cutting short my sleep. I pressed the receiver without checking to see who was calling.

“Good evening, Nnenna” a familiar voice came.

“Good evening” I said sleepily.

“I have been trying to reach you. There will be an important meeting next week and it will require you to be at work tomorrow.”

Hearing about work tore my sleepy eyes wide open; that was when I realized it was my boss. I looked on the screen again to confirm, it was Mr. Olakunle. I quickly apologized.

“Good evening Sir, sorry I was sleeping. Hope all is well sir?”

My mind quickly went to Fatima, was there any trouble at work? Did anyone find out what happened and tell my boss or did she tell him about her new faith? Many thoughts raced through my head and I cringed at the thought of a query or even firing. It was obvious I had overstepped my bounds.

“Yes, but we have a lot of tiding to do tomorrow and it may take all day. We will be having an emergency visit from our project partners, the Executive Director just called to inform me. They came into the country and decided to give us an unannounced visit by 9am on Monday; they want to see our records for monitoring and evaluation. You are aware that they are the funders of our project and we can't afford to leave any loose ends. So we all will be in the office by 10am tomorrow so that we can finish up the monthly reports and our new project proposal.”

He was speaking very fast and I managed to heave a sigh of relief. He continued:

“We have virtually done nothing about the budget and it's going to take a lot of time; we need to finish it up so we can present it when they arrive. I don't want late submission like we did in our last project, you know how long it took before it was approved and how it hindered us for months, I wouldn't want a repeat of that. I am calling others to inform them as well and Fatima, the corps member volunteered to join us later in the day. Your lunch will be taken care of and I assure you, you will be duly compensated. Sorry for any inconveniences this may cause you.”

“No problem Sir, thank you Sir.”

What more could an employee say to her boss who asked her to come to work by 8am on a Sunday morning. It was really inconveniencing and for a moment, I regretted picking his call. But what could I do? We were asked to always be ready and available for emergency situations like this and this was the first of its kind. I had planned to go to church with Fatima, but now we will both be at work tomorrow. I felt sad that my schedule for the Sunday was screwed.

I called Fatima and she told me that Mr. Olakunle called to plead with her to come and help out if she was free. She knew he still assumed she wasn't going to church but she declined, telling him that she had an appointment to keep by 8am and would be coming over to join us later at 12 noon.

Since she wasn't a permanent staff and was working without pay, she wasn't obligated to work in situations as this and only agreed to come on basis of respect and loyalty.

“I wish I was a corper like you o, so that nobody will be bossing me around like this.” I teased.

“See you, is it not you permanent staff that are *chopping* all the money, you have to do all the work too. So what do we do about the service? I really want to go.”

I was about telling her to postpone coming to service till the next Sunday but I didn't want to stifle her desire. Just then, a thought came into my mind.

“I will call Pastor Emeka now and explain to him. I will plead with him to come and pick you up on their way to church. If he agrees, you can go with them but you will have to prepare on time because he goes early with his family.”

“No problem, Inenna. Just let me know what he says, if it doesn't work out then I will turn up at work but that maybe around 9am.”

“Don't worry; I don't think he will object to this plan. I am sure they will be glad to have you and even bring you back after the service. You will enjoy the service plus the Sunday rice that you will surely partake in.” I teased again.

I didn't want to spoil Fatima's joy on her first day at church. So I guaranteed her that she would have a great time. We both laughed as I ended the call.

I called Pastor Emeka to inform him of the latest development and he agreed to pick her up. I was glad everything was working out fine despite the sudden interruption that almost wrecked my plans.

I reminded Fatima to prepare on time and promised to wake her up early. I couldn't believe this day was finally here and she was going to church for the first time. I wished I was going to be there, sitting beside her and seeing the joy in her face, but no; I will be somewhere in the office, beholding tons of paper, all thanks to 'our project funders' for their unprecedented visit.

We were drowning in our work as we flipped through papers one after the other, made deliberations and edited reports upon reports. My workaholic boss didn't notice it was way past midday even when I continuously drew his attention to that with my intermittent yawning. Luckily, Fatima walked in and that was when he checked the time and announced we were due for a lunch break.

She wasn't looking as joyful as I expected, I tried to pick the message from her face but it was expressionless. I remembered that I couldn't ask her about the service in the presence of other colleagues so I just greeted and she also replied coldly. I knew something wasn't quite right. I feared that she didn't go for the service again and wished we could talk.

Mr. Olakunle thanked her for coming and invited her to join us for lunch but she declined saying she just ate before heading out. He gave her the monthly activity register to fill and crosscheck for errors as he headed out for the 15 minutes lunch break.

Mr. Olakunle had ordered for a plate of food and drink for each of us at the eatery behind our office. I waited for everyone to leave and begged Damilola, my colleague to help me secure my order.

“Fati, how was the service?” I asked in a low tone.

“It was fine,” she said. There was no excitement in her voice and it bothered me.

“Did you enjoy it?” I was curious.

“Well, it was ok.”

“Tell me more, what happened?”

“Nothing much shaa, we had a good time but I didn't like the way everyone was just looking at me, I guess it was because of the way I was dressed. Initially I felt strange and a bit uncomfortable but I blended in with time. Maybe my face was too new and unfamiliar.”

I knew that this wasn't good, she sounded really disappointed.

“Okay, tell me the part of the service you didn't enjoy and the part you enjoyed the most.”

“Ermmmm... the singing was ok and lively. There were prayers, testimonies and preaching. The Pastor preached on something about Deliverance from ancestral curses. He said our fore fathers sinned against God by worshipping idols and the punishment for their sin was on our head and the only way out was for him to conduct deliverance for us. He called on people to bring money to sow a seed to deliver them from the sins of their ancestors. I knew I must have been bound by my ancestors too so I quickly went to the altar and made a pledge for him to pray for my deliverance.”

“Oh My God!” I screamed.

“What?” She asked.

“Continue” I said, holding myself back.

“Then what confused me was that after the deliverance, he said everyone must give every single dime they came to church with and anyone who didn't would incur the wrath of God. He said it was a directive God gave him and we must all obey. I was really scared so I went and gave all the money I had on me. But I have been wondering, will God be angry with me or kill me if I don't give all the money I came to church with?

“No.” I was already distraught.

“He even said that God had a way of sending a devourer to anyone who failed to give Him 10% of their earnings and their offerings too. I was really afraid of all the demands God was making and how He quickly punishes anyone at the slightest deviation, it's quite different from what you and Auntie Peace have been telling me about Him.”

I was completely speechless.

“If not that Pastor Emeka brought me back, I wouldn't have had any transport fare. Right now, I have no dime on me.”

“Heyaa... I am really sorry about that. But I hope they welcomed you as a first timer.” I tried changing the topic.

“Yes, we were given meat pie and a drink as well as a pamphlet containing information about the church and one small book written by the Pastor.”

“Thanks so much for attending; we will talk about your questions after work.” I mumbled.

Just then, the door opened slowly; Dami was the first to return:

“Nnenna, na so you like work reach? What happened naa, you didn't come to eat again abi you are not hungry? I brought your food in a take away pack but in case you are not hungry, please tell me o, it will be good to have this kind of free food again as my dinner.”

I managed to force a smile as she handed me a nylon containing the food and drink. “Thank you Dami.” I said shyly.

13

Chapter Thirteen

What began as a simple question and answer session was turning into a time of mind blowing revelations. Fatima's visit to the church had left her with numerous questions; so we decided to go to Aunty Peace for clarification. She took her time to explain things to us, trying her best not to throw stones or sound judgmental. I noticed it and I admired her wisdom and discretion.

“Let me explain something to you.” Aunty Peace began.

“When we come into Christ, we enter into a different kingdom. The bible says that God has translated us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear son, in another passage He says that Christ has blotted out the handwriting of the ordinances which were written against us and made a show of them openly, triumphing over them on the cross. Again, any man that is in Christ Jesus is a new creation, old things are passed away and behold all things have become new. I can go on and on quoting scriptures for you; there are lots of them my dear sisters. No matter what your past was like, in Christ, you have a new life. It is very important that we stick to God's word and not give in to the wisdom of men.”

“Ma, but he said it was God that instructed him to raise the money for our deliverance.” Fatima asked again.

“My dear, I really don't know, but all I know is that the mind of God is very plain and simple to know. God has shown us His ways in the Bible- it is the revealed will of God and if anyone says anything contrary, we must refute it and stick to what is written down in God's word. If you stick with the word, you can never get it wrong.”

“You see, giving to God is a healthy Christian habit, not a means of deliverance. If you see all your possessions with the eyes of a steward, you will have no trouble releasing them when there is a need. God doesn't threaten us to give to the Church; it is our responsibility just the same way a son or daughter sweeps the house and washes plates without any coercing, because he is a member of the family. He doesn't expect to be specially rewarded because he worked at home; he has only done what he is supposed to do. When we give to God, it shouldn't be motivated by how much He will give to us in return but out of love for the King and His kingdom. It is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that frees us from sin and the devil not the money we sow as seed.”

“Another thing is that if you understand who you are in Christ, no ancestral curse will hold you back in life. Jesus has put an end to them all, you are no longer in the kingdom of darkness where ancestral curses keep people down, you have been set free and you are now seated with Christ. He is your ancestor, His blessings are now yours. Your lineage is the lineage of Christ so you are living in ancestral blessings.”

Mrs. Peace went on and on explaining these truths to us as we asked many questions and got clarifications, we left happy and armed with God's truth.

The first voice I heard was unmistakable; it was Pastor Emeka's.

“Sir, my point is that we need to focus more on the bible; that is how to feed the flock God has given us. If we concentrate on feeding them with God's word, we won't have struggles in giving, love, commitment, and other areas. Look at the petty quarrels we have to settle everyday; it's because the people are not grounded in the word.

Come to think of it, the number of people who come for Bible study is less than one-tenth of the entire congregation and if you notice, this number is even dropping. It's mainly the church workers that come these days. The people have no hunger for the word; some of them don't even bother to study it in their homes. We need to..."

"What you are saying is that I should stop raising special offerings and seed of faith? How then do we settle our expenses? You are talking as if you don't know how these things are run, you and I know how much is sunk into this ministry to have a befitting service every Sunday: rent, fueling the generator and all, not to talk of the lots of money we need for the building project. Even the transportation and quality refreshment initiative that we began recently to attract more people and keep them from going to other churches, these things cost money. You amaze me Pastor Emeka!" Pastor Jerry's voice followed.

"Sir, I know all these. This is the work of God not that of any man. I believe if we trust God He will abundantly supply all our needs without us having to task the congregation every Sunday. It is not quality refreshment that keeps a congregation, it is the word, if we don't feed them with the sincere milk of God's word; no amount of refreshment will keep them.

"Remember Jesus said that no one can come to Him expect the father draws him. I am really sorry to be sounding this way Sir, but with due respect I think we have missed it somewhere. For instance, deliverance from curses is not carried out with money but by the word of God, that is the truth. If they understand their place in Christ, the chains will fall off; we don't need to make it a means of raising funds.

"Also, the gospel is not all about getting people excited and leaving them with no personal encounter with Christ. If you look closely into the congregation, you will see how shallow we are, we lack depth and only cling to the words that promise us material things to meet our needs. We are now using God as a means to our selfish ends, we don't care about souls or impacting other lives, we live as we choose yet come to church on Sundays to get our needs met. We care very little about obeying God and following His..."

"It's enough Pastor Emeka! I knew it! I knew that one day; you would turn against me. I have tried from the beginning to make sure you were comfortable,

I have constantly raised your pay, given you a befitting home and made sure you had all you needed. But this is all I get in return. You come here to tell me that I have deviated from God's word. I can see you, follower of God's word! You haven't come across the scripture that says a worker is worthy of his wages. I suffered to build this congregation up to this point. I have sacrificed a lot to keep it going, yet doubling in my salary is now a deviation.

“Go outside and see what other Pastors are doing; their churches are building mansions for their Pastors and buying them brand new cars. When last did I change my car let alone renovate my house? When last did the church sponsor me on a trip abroad for vacation? Yet I work even harder than others and all I get from you is this crap. I am disappointed in you Pastor Emeka.”

“Sir, you are taking it too far, please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying you shouldn't get a good pay, all I am saying is that we shouldn't twist God's word to meet our needs. You have been an exceptional leader all these years; you have been a huge blessing to my life and that of many others and I believe in this ministry. We both know all that we have been through to get this far. You can't possibly think that I will turn my back on you now. I have never stopped supporting and praying for you but I also owe you a duty to tell you the truth in love and that is exactly what I am doing.” Pastor Emeka explained.

“Are you done?” I could hear the anger in Pastor Jerry's voice.

“Yes Sir but I have a request to make. While my wife and I thought and prayed about the church, we came up with a way to help out. We decided to relinquish 20% of my salary so that we can cater for the pressing needs and not have to raise money weekly for the church.”

“Hahahahaha!” Pastor Jerry's thunderous laughter echoed through the toilet walls where I was standing. “You are impossible! You know, you always want to put yourself in the good light and paint every other person as the devil.”

“Sir, you are really misunderstanding me, this is just between you, my wife and I. I am not trying to paint any picture. I only asked for a cut in my salary after much deliberation, I felt it would help the ministry, at least for now until we find other ways to meet our needs. I love the church, I love the work of God and I don't want us to derail. Please understand me.”

“Well, it's ok. But I hope you are not trying to ask me to do the same?”

“No Sir, it's my personal decision. I just want us to stop raising funds every other Sunday. Let part of my salary stand in it's place as much as it can. I don't even want anyone to hear about it.”

“Well, I must commend you Pastor Emeka, we seriously need funds in this ministry.” Pastor Jerry replied.

Their voices grew faint as the door opened; I could barely pick anymore words. I fought hard to hold my breath as they walked past the church restroom from the main office. They were saying other things as they left.

I had gone to use the toilet when I overheard the discussion between Pastor Emeka and Pastor Jerry. I wanted to leave but I couldn't resist the temptation of staying back. Though I didn't plan to eavesdrop, their voices were loud enough for any passersby to hear so I leaned against the door and heard every word they spoke. Too bad of me, I thought.

While they left, I just stood there still shocked at the things I heard.

“Oh Lord, help us!” I cried.

15

Chapter Fifteen

Tega pulled his mini truck in front of our office as I looked out from my window. I couldn't pick out the face of the other guy in the front seat but his form looked quite familiar.

Tega or Mr. T as we fondly called him was our Human Resource manager who worked with our head office in Abuja. Anytime he visited meant there was either a new project work or a new staff. I remembered how he had brought me to the office on my first day at work after our week long training program last year, telling me how lucky I was to be taken into the organization as the Monitoring & Evaluation officer, a position he considered enviable. He also urged me to work hard at giving it my best shot.

He was really a nice guy whose dedication and poise was unmistakable. I remembered with excitement how he had assured me that I would do perfectly well as an M&E officer even when I didn't think I deserved the job. He personally put me through the rudiments and was a big source of encouragement to me.

“It looks like we are having a new intake.” Damilola, my colleague broke into my thoughts.

“Yea, I guess so, thank God we will have one more hand to assist in this cumbersome Ford project. I am almost going nuts with all these figures and reports.”

“As in eh... God has answered our prayers especially now that Fati is rounding off her service year in few months. Hmmm, work would have killed both of us.”

“We thank the Lord.” I replied.

“We really thank the Lord my sister.”

With that we gave out a good laugh as Mr. T walked in with a handsome young man behind him.

“Hello ladies, nice to see you again. I can barely recognize you two, wow! This change is wonderful o.” Mr. T greeted.

“Good day Sir.” we echoed.

“Good day Damilola and Nnenna, it's been like ages; I am sure you have forgotten about me. Look how you girls are bubbling, you both look amazing. I should apply to be transferred here; it seems this is where the money is.”

“Hahahaha!” We all laughed.

“Haba Mr. T, you are the one closer to Buhari and the money. We can only get the remnant that you send to us.” Dami teased.

They both roared with more laughter, but my laughter waned when I saw who Mr. Tega brought, I couldn't believe my eyes. “I hope this is a joke or something, it just had to be.” I thought.

“You girls will not finish me with laughter this morning. But I am really serious, you girls are looking good. Well, I guess Mr. Olakunle is in his office.”

“Thank you. Yes he is in.” Dami replied.

“Ok, I will go straight to see him. Meanwhile, let me introduce our new staff here with me. Dami and Nnenna, please meet Frank, our new Program officer. Frank meet Miss Damilola Adenuga and Miss Nnenna Chukwuneke, they are both Monitoring and Evaluation officers and they are wonderful ladies, I am certain you will enjoy working with them.”

I managed to stretch my hand for a handshake with Frank who behaved like he had never seen me before. I secretly wondered how he managed to get here and even maintain his composure. A thousand thoughts flashed through my head; did he come to get back at me for leaving him? Was he here to get rid of me finally? Was this a revenge mission or a normal job offer? I tried to wrap my head around it but couldn't. Frank will never cease to amaze me.

“Let's proceed to meet your Executive Director”, Mr. T said turning to Frank. “He must be waiting to receive you.”

Knowing too well that my two legs couldn't carry me any longer, I slumped into my seat.

“Nnenna, what is it?” Dami rushed towards me.

“Oh no, not again!”

That was all I could mutter.

After we concluded the prayers for the day, Pastor Emeka encouraged us not to relent in our private intercession as God was set to do a new thing. He reminded us to pray earnestly before each service and look forward to it with great expectation.

I still couldn't believe that Frank and I were working together in the same office, on the same project. I had continuously denied it but it was time to face the hard reality and accept it.

He has come to stay!

The Sunday service began in a spontaneous manner, we didn't follow the routine, no protocols, no order of service. Everyone just seemed hungry and expectant. It was rather unusual.

While we waited for the moderator to mount the podium, I saw one woman kneeling at one corner of the hall crying and praying. I couldn't pick what she said, but whatever it was, her soul was in deep distress.

I had seen another lady outside while I was walking in talking to our Women's wing leader with tears in her eyes, she looked so distressed and burdened I felt

like going to listen to her. I didn't understand what was going on and silently prayed that all was well. I wondered if it was another family conflict or was it another court case or choir member's tussle. It had better not be, I prayed.

As the choir began their ministrations, there was so much stillness in the room that a pin drop would sound like a bomb blast; only their angelic voices could be heard soaring. The change in the atmosphere was so obvious that almost everyone knew there was something unusual about the service. I looked towards the pulpit and noticed Pastor Jerry was on his knees praying.

The choir was lost in their Kim Walker's *Spirit Break out* and seemed not to find a way to bring the rendition to a close. It was more than a rendition, it was a timely ministrations and as they sang their hearts out, the congregation couldn't hold it back anymore; I too was caught up in the heart-rending worship. By the time they were done, almost everyone was already praying.

The last thing I remembered was how I sank into my seat and with my head bowed and heart aflame, I prayed like never before. There was no prayer point or prayer leader, yet everyone was praying their hearts out; this continued for what seemed like eternity. It was as though God's Spirit caught hold of everyone, His presence was palpable. The song continued for so long that even when they left the stage, many people were still lost in the Spirit.

It was like God was dealing with everyone individually at their own level and addressing personal issues. Many went to the altar and rededicated their lives to God. Others literally stood up to go and make peace with someone they were at loggerheads with. It was a service like never before and I knew God was doing a great work in our midst. I didn't want it to end.

Oh, what an awesome time of fellowship!

16

Chapter Sixteen

Bringing the service to an end proved to be a difficult task. People were so lost that nobody bothered about what time it was. Nobody even noticed it was already past 12 pm; the children department had dismissed and few of the older ones were strolling into the adult church.

Pastor Emeka was the person to finally speak:

“Brethren, I didn't come to preach. I wish I could but I can't, God is here and you are a witness to it. It's not about the songs or how you feel now, but what are you going to do after now? When you get back to your homes, are you going to continue living in strife, unforgiveness, hatred and jealousy? Will you continue in disobedience, pride and all the things that grieve God? That's the question you need to ask yourself now.”

“We come to Church everyday, but do we really fear God and obey Him? The path God has called us to walk in is the same path Jesus walked in—the path of obedience to the Father even unto death. That's what it means to be a disciple.”

“A disciple is not one who comes to church, sings in the choir, sweeps the church, goes for evangelism, pays his/her tithe, gives for building project and all the other things we do. Those are just the externals; they are the fruit of a life

who has denied himself, taken up his cross and is following Jesus.”

“It's not about occupying one position in church neither is it about getting your needs met but laying down your life so that Christ may be glorified in you; that's what this is about.”

“We have mixed a lot of things up; we have focused on things that mattered little while leaving the things that are of utmost importance. No matter how big an auditorium we build, if we don't build lives; our works won't stand the test of time. No matter the amount of money we raise, if we don't raise men; we have laboured in vain.”

“I want us to go home and think about these things that God is laying in our hearts, ponder on them and choose to change our ways. The church is not a place for pretense and hypocrisy; Jesus came for the sinner not for those who think that they are righteous. So it's OK to feel terrible but let it go beyond your emotions to action. That's what repentance is-to turn around and change your ways.”

With that, he explained that the senior Pastor had instructed him to lead us in the benediction and take a few announcements after which the service came to an end. Many people stayed back trying to regain their composure before leaving. Others dragged their feet out of the church but one look at them will tell you that they still had unfinished business with God that they were off to.

I came to work on Monday morning determined to speak with Frank. Working with him these few days was filled with lots of tension and I was going to end it.

“Good morning Frank, please can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure.”

“You see, I think it's time we put the past behind us. Working with you has not been so easy but I had to bring myself to that point where I have to get used to it. You know there is a lot of tension between us and it is affecting our productivity. I don't want it to be so, we should be mature and stop being childish.”

“I have heard you, any other thing?”

“Is that all you have to say?”

I didn't see the bombshell coming.

“What else do you want me to say?”

“Good morning guys, I see you two are having some serious talk this early morning.” Fatima interrupted. “Please who has a phone charger here, I forgot mine at home and my battery is flat. Inenna, you should have.”

I reached for my handbag and handed Fatima the charger.

“Thanks, I didn't mean to interrupt o, please continue your gist.”

“We were done a long time ago.” Frank replied immediately.

I was startled and walked back to my desk, slowly, wondering how so much love could suddenly turn to so much hostility or was it even love in the first place? I kept my thoughts to myself as Frank walked over to his desk just a few inches from mine.

Though our office was large, it looked smaller now that I am stuck in the same room with my ex. It was as though his eyes were shooting at me like arrows but anytime I looked, he was looking elsewhere. I cringed at the thought of exchanging glances or being caught staring.

I tried to concentrate on my work and drown out the thoughts gripping my heart-they were thoughts of resignation. But I loved my job and needed the money, how could I resign because of Frank? Was it my pride or immaturity? I knew it was both and many more.

Though I was very hungry when I got home after work, I was too tired to make any food. I sank into my bed for my usual 15 minutes rest; that was one of the most cherished moments of my life.

I went through the activities of the day, smiled at myself for the good memories and consciously avoided the bad ones. I also used this time to daydream about the future, I thought about my dream prince charming that has refused to show up. I was taught to wait for him and not to go looking for him, but why was he delaying? Does he need some green light?

I imagined a godly man who loved the Lord and showered me with lots of affection too. He must be very focused, purpose-driven, worded, yet romantic. I imagined that he would be tall, muscular and his smile would take my breath away.

But were they still such men out there? Worded and romantic? I prayed they were.

Something told me that the romantic guys were not godly and the godly ones were not romantic and I secretly preferred the former. I laughed at my carnality. I scolded myself for such thoughts and imagined that God would use His sovereignty to ask me to marry a Pastor. Oh no! “I am not cut out for all those 'Mother-in-Israel' roles.” So I dismissed the thought.

I lazily dragged myself out of the fairy tale world and reminded myself that I was only 23; I still had a long way to go or so I thought.

The growing rumblings of my intestine set me on my feet and I quickly prepared noodles; my favorite fast food on days like this and with the can of fanta I bought on my way back, I sent the noodles home to where they belonged.

17

Chapter Seventeen

As Fatima's departure came closer, I was gradually becoming scared of what will happen to her afterwards. I wished she didn't have to go back home, but that was all I could do – wish.

How would her parents react? I remember her hinting me that they were both strict and devout especially her father. When was the best time to share her testimony with them? What if they disowned her or took other drastic measures? What if she couldn't withstand it and went back? All these questions plagued my mind and made me pray more for her and her family.

I was consoled by the fact that she had become filled with the Holy Spirit. It happened last week during the Bible study and she spoke in tongues for the first time. I was overjoyed and grateful to God that I didn't have to worry about her growth. With the Holy Spirit now at work in her, I knew she was in the best hands.

We spent more time together talking, studying and praying over the next few days and the glow about her was unmistakable. Everyone at work knew that something had really changed in her. Dami was the first to probe during our

break time on Friday:

“Fati, *wassup* with you? You have really changed o, I still remember when you came newly, you were not like this; a lot has changed about you.”

“Really?” she giggled revealing her sparkling set of teeth that lay securely in their place. “A lot like?” “Errmmm... a whole lot, too much to mention; I don't even know how to explain it. But shaa tell us who the bobo is that is putting all this smile on your face? I need to know him too and thank him.”

“Kai Damilola, Haba! Must it always be about a guy? Can't I just be happy and joyful on my own?”

“You can o, but I know what I am saying. I know this type of joy; it either comes from the Lord or a making sense boo.”

“Hahaha, it is God o. *Shikena!*” Fatima could hardly hold back the laughter.

“Ok o. Let me believe you, but don't keep me in the dark for too long. You know I always like to know what's up so that I can start sewing my material.”

“Hahahaha... I know naa, is it not you again?”

“Hahahaha.” They both roared with laughter and I couldn't help but join.

Damilola was a bundle of joy to be around, she was all shades of sanguine and there was never a dull moment with her. She always made the office lively and work so much fun to look forward to. She would always yab me about being too quiet and too serious with life, according to her; work was fun and not a death sentence. She made my otherwise boring work life a great delight. I always thanked God for bringing her my way and hoped she comes to know the Lord more and walk with Him more closely.

As our meeting with Auntie Peace was coming to an end for the day, she began pouring out her heart to us:

“Nnenna and Fatima, what I am telling you is beyond words, it's better experienced than explained. There is just so much in God we've not even scratched the surface. What we are seeing now is not even up to a glimpse, but the problem is that we get filled easily.”

“We set out to seek God and desire Him but just when He begins to pour out Himself, we get satisfied. It happens so soon because our hunger is not deep, we

have become so familiar with the ordinary that we can't press for more like Paul.”

“As for me, I want God to blow my mind, to exceed my imagination. I want to know the depth of the riches of what we have in Christ. I want to receive the revelation of Christ and live in the reality.”

“There is so much knowledge in the world today about God, yet men lack the revelation of Christ. We don't yet know the Christ we claim to preach; He is limitless, boundless and past finding out. What He did for us on the cross is so deep we can't wrap our heads around it.”

“My heart is longing for a time when the body of Christ will come to the measure of the full stature of Christ. I am done with the usual, with what our fathers did and what we are doing now, I long for the newness that is in Christ; things that eyes have not seen and ears have not heard, things that only God can show to a man.”

“I long to see Christ exalted and praised in every heart, to see His Lordship supreme in every life, mine being chief. I want to see His Kingdom come and His will being done. I want to see us carrying God into our offices, homes, streets and all the corners of the earth. God is not a secret to be kept; He longs to find expression in us; in you and me to the dying world and thirsty souls all around the neighbourhood. He doesn't want to be hidden in the four walls of a building or hoarded in the confines of our comfort zones. He wants to be known to all!”

“What I am asking for is an outbreak of God!”

“Lord, is that too much to ask? Is that not what you desire too? Is that not why you died on the cross; that men may be reconciled with you.”

She was sobbing gently and we were all swept off in deep, heartfelt cries and hunger. All I could mutter was “Lord, I want to know you...”

18

Chapter Eighteen

Sister Tope was next to give her testimony:
“Brethren.” She began.

“As you all know, I have been looking for a job for some time now. I have attended several interviews, in fact in the last one; I did so well I was sure I will get the job. But the MD asked me to sleep with him before giving me the offer; I refused and was denied a job I knew I was qualified for. It hurts but I still thank God. I know He has another plan and I will keep praying, believing and waiting on Him.”

“I want us to understand that faith is not only meant for getting things from God, sometimes we have to give up things because of our faith. By faith, we obey God and please Him and we have to prove this in different ways; yours may not happen like mine. You know we have been taught that if you have faith, God will deliver you, but that's less than half of the truth. You may fail an exam because you refused to compromise and that's faith. That God allowed it doesn't mean you have no faith or that He isn't capable. He is more interested in refining your faith than making you happy. I pray God to give us understanding and strengthen us in Jesus name.”

“Amen!” The congregation chorused.

Many people expected her to say that because of her faith, God miraculously gave her the job, but she reminded us of men and women in the Bible whose faith caused them to give up things.

This testimony blessed me so much. I was reminded that the primary work of faith in the believer's life is not to help us acquire things but to first teach us that we can live without them, remove our dependence from them and place it on God. That way our joy and testimony is not only on getting and getting but on obedience to God and as long as we obey and please Him, He will not withhold any good thing from us.

Other people came afterwards to testify of the wonderful things God was doing in their lives. One testimony brought tears to my eyes: A couple who were at the brink of a divorce had their marriage restored and they were back together.

The woman testified how she and her husband were separated for almost 6 years due to her husband's infidelity, they had given up and were already filing for divorce because her friends continuously advised her to quit. But God was working on their hearts all the while and during this period her husband encountered Christ and truly repented of his sins and begged for her forgiveness. God helped her let go and restored their marriage and they loved each other like never before. Their little daughter seemed to be the most delighted, she giggled endlessly.

I was in awe of how God changed a seemingly impossible situation.

“Indeed, our God is a great God; He knows how to turn a hopeless situation around. Just hang in there.” Pastor Emeka took over as the congregation erupted in heartfelt praise and adoration. He also encouraged us to reach out to people, pray with them and stand by them through trying times.

Many hearts were encouraged and strengthened. It was indeed a refreshing time in His presence.

We continued our prayers for the church with greater zeal and passion as we were seeing torrents of answer. We knew that God's word is indeed true and He is always willing to hear and answer anytime we humble ourselves and call on Him.

We also knew that if we persisted, we would see more of the answers.

“We sincerely appreciate your hard work and dedication throughout your stay with us. We wish you all the best in life.”

Mr. Olakunle ended his brief speech and we responded with another round of applause.

The send forth party for the corps members in our office brought sweet memories and mixed feelings for me. Fatima and Lekan would be leaving us next week and I will definitely miss them both especially Fatima.

Lekan Adeniyi was a gentle man in every sense of the word. He was reserved and hardly spoke unlike the rest of us; I always wondered how a guy could be so reserved and withdrawn. Despite Damilola's relentless *yabbings*, he proved a hard nut to crack. He smiled very little and worked a lot; always glued to his laptop. For him, life was all about work.

The first time I saw him angry was one of those days Dami yabbed the life out of him. She told him she wondered how he would ever *chyke* a lady let alone propose to his future wife. It was so funny we burst out and laughed him to scorn. Though I regretted doing that, I consoled myself that I wasn't the one saying it and more still; she was saying the truth. He was really offended and Dami didn't bother to apologize because to her; it was just a joke. But now, I know better.

The management got them gifts and promised to give them priority consideration for employment if there was an opening and they indicated interest in working with us.

Lekan had other plans I guessed. He looked like a potential entrepreneur; someone who would prefer to work on his own and be the boss rather than a regular employee. I admired his strict work ethics.

Fatima on the other hand already planned to drop her CV before leaving and stay back if employed but her father insisted on her returning home to work in his NGO; the same reason he worked her NYSC posting to an NGO. Despite this, I had an inkling that God had another plan for her.

I hope it's what I am thinking!

19

Chapter Nineteen

“...God who said let there be light has caused His light to shine into our hearts. But this light doesn't stop with us, He also said in the book of Matthew: “You are the light of the world.” There is no point fussing over the darkness in the world, God knew of it and made adequate provisions for it- You and me.”

“We are to shine as light in our world; we are to show the world what it means to be a Christian. Don't get swallowed up in darkness, rather let His light shine through you so that men can see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

“God is glorified when we leave the confines of a Church building and carry His light to the streets, to difficult situations, to lost people, to the mundane events of life. That is what it means to be a light. It has nothing to do with your denomination or doctrine.”

Everyone listened with rapt attention as Pst. Emeka preached his sermon. I was particularly pleased with his demeanor and charisma, but more than that, he spoke with so much passion one would easily know he was convinced of what he was preaching and lived it out.

“There is no better time to shine than now.” He continued “Jesus didn't just say we should shine but to shine so much that we will be seen. The darkness is thick, but our light is brighter. Hallelujah!”

“Hallelujah!” The congregation chorused.

“Darkness can never comprehend the light of Christ and this is the light that shines into men's lives and reveals Jesus to them. The solution to the problems in the world lies with you and I- the Church. Jesus is the answer and He is in us but if we don't rise and shine, darkness will not be overcome.”

“The Church of which I speak is not a denomination but the body of Christ all over the world; those who have been called of God and believe in Him- that is the church Jesus is coming for.”

“God is at work in us to produce that which is pleasing to Him; He is removing every spot, wrinkle and blemish. Jesus is not coming for a weak, tired, crawling church. Never! He is coming for a Glorious Church, triumphant and victorious; that is what He sent me to tell us today.”

“Away with the frail attitude, away with fearful and sinful lifestyle, we are the Triumphant Church clothed in might and strength. We have overcome sickness, sin, poverty, religion, fear and death. We are conquering our world; taking nations for Christ and establishing His dominion all over the earth. We are conquering men's heart with the love of Christ and bringing every creation in obedience to Christ.”

“Enough of folding our hands and complaining, backbiting and stabbing each other, enough of counting who is seating the largest congregation and who is wearing a better suit. We unite with one voice and one heart to say: Your Kingdom come oh Lord! Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

“There is a lot more to following Jesus than coming to Church every Sunday, feeling good in an air-conditioned, state-of-the-art facility, and speaking the language of Christians – Christianese.”

“As you leave here, throw away your denominational cloaks and carry the Church beyond these walls. This is just a building, you are the Church! Transmit light to your homes, offices, businesses and world. Don't live beggarly. Live

righteously and victoriously as we await the glorious return of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.”

“I pray God opens our heart to a deeper understanding of His body- the Church so we can fill in our part in the whole. I pray we all shine as the Lights that we are.”

My heart was greatly stirred by the message but I guessed nobody was more blessed than Fatima. Before the close of the service, the church prayed passionately for her. She was leaving on Monday morning and this was her last service with us. Though she wanted to stay some more but her father had already booked her flight and she knew better than to say no to him.

For her, it was a waiting battle that she could never run away from; delaying it would make no difference.

The church members showered her with love and affection. It was really an emotional time as few of us gathered round her after the service to bid her farewell and share our last moments with her as a family.

She did her best to fight back the tears but her feelings got a better part of her. Some were deeply moved to tears as they hugged and wished her well.

As for me, I just stood and wondered why God couldn't use his veto power to keep her with us at least for some time instead of allowing her to go when things were becoming interesting. I cringed at my selfish motive. She was light and God was sending her to her family who needed it more.

As though she read my thoughts; she spoke with teary eyes:

“I really appreciate you all for showing me love and kindness; for accepting me. I believe you will keep praying for me as I go to shine as light in my dark world just like we learnt today.” Smiling she continued “You guys know that we can't all remain here, there will be too many lights that it could blind the eyes.” She giggled somewhat surprised she was saying such soothing words. But nothing could be truer.

We spent the night together talking about our plans for the future and how to apply the things we learnt over the past months and we enjoyed every moment. I

sent my boss a text informing him that I will be few minutes late for work the next day. Thankfully, he didn't have a problem with it.

I accompanied Fatima to the airport in the morning to bid her farewell. Pastor Emeka had sent his driver to drop us after few words of encouragement and prayer. He also gave her some money in an envelope.

We arrived just in time to meet the announcement of the flight departure; she held my hand as she spoke:

“Inenna, God is wonderful. I never imagined all that happened in these few months. I didn't plan for it and even if I was told, I wouldn't believe it. But I am most grateful for how God ordered my footsteps and brought me to Himself. You have been a huge blessing and I can never forget that. I pray God causes our paths to cross anytime soonest. But I will keep in touch and don't stop praying for me.

“I won't dearie, I will really miss you. Safe trip darling.” We hugged so tightly.

“Love ya.”

“Love you more. Say me “hi” to everyone at home.”

20

Chapter Twenty

“Madam, e get one man wey dey find you, im dey outside.” He spoke in Pidgin English as usual.

“Me?”

“Yes madam.”

I followed our security officer outside wondering who it was that came looking for me. I wasn't expecting anybody so I couldn't guess, I wondered why he hadn't let whoever it was in and insisted on telling me first.

“Oga Chris, didn't he tell you his name?” I asked as we walked to the gate.

“Im say na Davidi be im name, you sabi any Davidi so?”

“Emmm...yeah, kinda but I doubt if the David I know even knows my workplace, besides I am not expecting him. If there was anything, he could have called.”

“Na wetin I ask am too o. Make I tell am say you no dey office?”

“No, not at all. We are almost there. There is no problem, let me see him.”

“Okay madam.”

I knew that whatever brought Bro David to my workplace must have been something serious. He was sitting at the gatekeeper's waiting room. He looked

bright and charming but a bit disturbed. He stood to greet me.

“Good day Sister Nnenna, I am so sorry for not calling before coming.”

“It's okay, you are welcome. I was wondering how you got my office address.”

“Yes, I am sorry about that too, I had to call Aunty Peace to get it from her plus I wanted to surprise you.”

“Hian! Surprise me *kee?* Well, I am very surprised.”

“I am really sorry to disturb your work; I will be as brief as possible.”

We walked to the lobby while exchanging pleasantries and catching up. I didn't know Bro David could be so friendly.

“Actually, I came to see you for something very important, I could have called but it's not a phone-talk. It's something we need to discuss one-on-one. I won't even go into it now because you are at work and it's going to take a lot of time. So for now, I just came so we can make things right. I know I have really hurt you; I am totally sorry. It wasn't me doing all that, I thought I was protecting the interest of the choir and the Church, but now I know better. I have battled with this for many weeks, it took God's help to overcome my pride and ego and summon the courage to come here today. Please Nnenna, forgive me and let's put all the past behind us. I am really ashamed of all I did and now regret it. Even when you came to make peace earlier, I was still lost in my ego; I should have listened to you instead of claiming to be right.”

I sat quietly as I listened to Bro David reel out his apology. I was stunned and found it hard to believe what I was hearing. He was a totally different person

“Lastly, this Saturday is my birthday and I want to specially invite you. Though it's not going to be a big party, I just want to celebrate with few friends and I will be honoured to have you there.”

“Wow! Happy birthday already. I will try not to miss it.” I blurted out trying my best to sound calm and excited even though I was not.

“Is that a yes?”

“Well, if you say so.”

“Great! See you on Saturday then. Errmmm... before I leave, I really want us to spend some time together some other time, say lunch or something; but that's if you don't mind and you are free.”

“You are not serious.”

“I really am. Or maybe I am asking for too much. But you can still see it as my way of trying to make up for all I have done. How about that?”

“I don't know; really you are asking for too much. Let's see how Saturday goes first.”

“I already have your word for it.”

“Till then.”

“Thanks a lot for your time. Once again, I am deeply sorry; I am a changed person now.”

“It's ok. Do have a lovely day ahead.”

“You too.”

Damilola was already waiting for me with questions as I returned to the office, she didn't even give me time to think about what just happened.

“Heiiiiii! Inenna, who is that fine guy?”

“Hian... You have come again. He is my church member.”

“Waawu! Church member that will come and look for you in the office by 11am, I have not seen that one o. He must have come for something really important.”

“Yea, you sefi; you too like gist. He came to invite me for his birthday this weekend.”

“Just that? He couldn't text or call? This is a serious somebody o, see special invitation!”

“Well, there was something else we needed to clean the slates on concerning the past so that was why he came.” I couldn't believe I was being so open to Damilola.

“I see, anyway we will go naa. I have been thinking of how to spend the weekend, I was even praying it won't be boring like last weekend. Thank God for answered prayers, it's Saturday abi?”

“Yea, 5pm.”

“I will come to your place so we can go together. This one you are not too excited about the birthday, hope you are not going to tell me you won't be going.”

“I may go, I don't know yet. But wait o, you have become more excited than the person who was invited. Madam owambe... see how you have already finished making plans.”

“Dry girl like you, I am only helping your life.”

“My helper since 1965...mtcheww.”

“Hahaha...but you know it's true naa. I am trying my best to *tush you up”.

“*Abeegie*, pass me those activity report registers let me transfer these names and continue from where I stopped.”

“So, it's now that I am saying something important that you will be forming workaholic... be here o, you will tell me whether it is from inside this computer that *Lé boo* will jump out and meet you.”

“Hahaha, Da-mi-lola! So you are coming for the birthday to find husband?”

“See you; my mum always used to say that we ladies must make ourselves findable. So gatherings like this can be a good place since it's a Christian gathering or do you want me to go to night clubs and beaches?”

“Well, I am not saying you shouldn't make yourself *findable*, but husband-hunting is not a good reason to attend a friend's birthday party.”

“My Dad met my mum her friend's birthday party in case you don't know. You never can tell.”

“Did he tell you he went there with the intention of finding a wife? I am not saying it doesn't happen, but we don't decide when they happen and when they don't.”

“We are saying the same thing, we don't decide, so make yourself *findable* and let God decide. Let it not be that God will bring your husband to meet you and you are locked in one office like that pressing computers.”

“God still knows how to bring your husband to that office to meet you pressing those computers.” I retorted.

“That's why I said you never can tell how God works; we should just make ourselves available for finding, *shikena!*” She insisted.

“*Kai*, Dami, you have won!”

It was fruitless arguing with her anytime, she had a strong point for every argument and she always won. I would always give in even when I didn't agree just for the sake of peace. This was one thing that I feared the most in my desire to share the gospel with Dami, she had a very persuasive spirit and was strongly opinionated. I always feared she would argue away the fact that she needed a personal relationship with Jesus with her claims of regular Church attendance. I

knew many times the Holy Spirit nudged me to speak to her but I always declined because I didn't want her to make an argument out of the gospel. She never liked to lose any argument.

I consoled myself with the fact that I was praying for her and waiting for the Holy Spirit to convict her by Himself.

What an excuse!

**tush* means to upgrade

21

Chapter Twenty One

We got to Bro David's apartment some minutes to 6 o'clock in the evening. We met a handful of friends exchanging pleasantries and of course taking selfies. I spotted the celebrant on the left side of the room; he was flanked by two ladies as they posed for several shots.

He wore a brightly coloured and flowered traditional attire that complemented his dark skin; I hadn't noticed the tall, dark and handsome man he was until now. His undoubtedly expensive wrist watch sent reflections through the standing mirror and I admired his brown loafers.

“Awwww, look who is here.” Bro David announced on spotting Dami and I as we made our way into his medium sized parlour, well lit and decorated. Everyone turned to see while we shyly sank into the sofa and he motioned for us to join him.

“Happy birthday Dave.” Dami and I said almost at the same time; just as we planned.

“Wow, this is the first time you are calling me Dave and I am glad. You were always scaring me with that “bro” title.”

“It's only for today o, just because it's your birthday.

“Wow, now I wish everyday was a birthday”

“I bet you do.”

“Thanks for making out time to come.”

“So sorry we are late, hope we didn't miss much. This is my good friend and colleague Damilola, we work in the same office.” I introduced Dami who was already going to do that herself.

“Hello Dami, thanks for coming to celebrate with me; you are most welcome.”

“Nice meeting you and Happy birthday. I learnt you came by the office the other day, too bad we didn't get to see.” Dami replied as they shook hands.

“Thanks dear. I didn't know you were around, my bad! By the way, you girls look gorgeous. I am elated to have you here, I think we can start the party, now that you are here... but first things first, I must get a few shots with you two. Camera rolling!”

We joined the league of “paparazzi's” as almost everyone was either snapping or posing and smiling; waiting to be snapped. All was part of the fun we had before taking our seats.

The MC cum moderator was Bro Vincent, our church member and he did a great job. He called one of the guests to say the opening prayer after which he welcomed us all and introduced the celebrant. He gave us room to ask him any question we wanted. Toyosi was the first to ask and her question threw everyone into an outburst of laughter:

“Bro David, when are you getting married?”

He tried to avoid the question but everyone insisted. He finally gave his conventional “very soon” reply.

Chika threw the next question with reckless abandon. I laughed my heart out and wondered why every question bothered on marriage:

“What are the 5 qualities you desire in a wife?”

“Well, they are just three: She must love the Lord and his word dearly. She must be teachable and respectful to the core.” Bro David replied.

“Wow!” Everyone echoed apparently amazed at such noble desires.

It was a memorable moment filled with lots of laughter and fun as other questions followed. We sang him birthday songs and said our wishes while we were served with food and drinks. The choir did a little song for him using his name; this moved him to tears.

Pastor Jerry was present too and he didn't miss out in the fun. At the end, he gave a brief word of exhortation, urging us to make the best of the years God gave us on the earth.

Bro David thanked everyone for coming after we said heartfelt prayers for him. His joy was unmistakable as we began dispersing.

“Nnenna, you guys made my day” he said as Dami and I went to say goodbye and give him the bow tie we got for him.

“Awww...I really hope we did. Please have this little gift; I was completely clueless on what to get for you. Thank God for Dami here, she actually made the choice. I hope you like it.”

“As long as it's from you, I'll love it.” He said, smiling broadly. My stomach churned.

What was he saying? I had better not get ideas into my head.

“Thanks Dave for the treat we had a nice time here and I really enjoyed myself.” Dami distracted us from the glances we were exchanging thus saving the day.

“Thanks for coming. I hope to see you more often.” David said still refusing to stop staring into my eyes.

“Happy birthday for the 100th time.” I mumbled, praying he looks away.

“Hahaha...It can never be said enough today, it's just once in a year you know. And I can't thank you enough.”

He walked us to the gate and bade us farewell.

As I turned off my room light to go to bed my phone beeped.

It was a text from Bro David:

Hello dearie, did I tell you you were looking splendid today?

Seeing you made my face glow, once again you made my day and I am grateful.

My heart was about jumping into my stomach when the second one came in: Oh...I forgot to say goodnight lovely.

To reply or not to reply?

I was drowning in this dilemma when the waiting arms of sleep came to my

rescue. I found myself still thinking of Bro David, or rather; Dave when I woke up at 5:45am the next morning. OMG! What is happening to me?

Everything was taking shape, the church I had once run away from was one I now loved with all my heart. It was my family and I loved everyone just like I did my biological family. I knew I belonged and was accepted. I knew I was a part of the body- Christ's body..

I noticed that though I wasn't heading any unit or department, I still knew I was responsible to God and my brethren in prayers and in caring for them. I realized that the sense of belonging I craved for didn't come from activities or events, but from connecting with one another, praying for them, caring and just being there.

I also realized that when I stopped complaining and started praying, people didn't change instantly, but I changed. I stopped pointing fingers and began doing my part. I marveled at how God could use seemingly mundane things to connect us to one another and I loved it all the way.

It was past one week and I hadn't heard from Fatima. I picked up my phone to call and she answered the very first time it rang.

“Hey Fati, it's like you were holding your phone, you didn't even allow it to ring properly.” I teased.

There was no reply.

“Hello Fati, wassup; can you hear me?”

All I could hear was gentle sobs.

Chapter Twenty Two

“I really don't know what to do, Inenna. My dad just left the room now, he is very angry with me” She managed to say.

“Calm down and talk to me Fatima, what happened?”

“He said he noticed a change in my behavior so he wanted to know what's happening. When he asked if I was still saying my daily prayers and reading the holy book, I...”

“Did you tell him?”

“I lied, Inenna. I lied that I still said my daily prayers and read the Koran. I was afraid to tell him. I feel so bad, does this mean I have denied Jesus?”

“No, not at all, that's not what it means. God knows you still love Him and are willing to serve Him. Don't let the devil fill you with guilt and shame. Just ask God to forgive you and move on. What you will do is to find a convenient time and have a private discussion with your dad, but you don't have to rush it; take your time no matter how long it takes.” I tried reassuring her.

“God, I am so scared. The look on his face was not good at all.” “Yes, he will be angry but I assure you, God will take care of you. What of your mum, does she know yet?”

“Not yet, but she is really getting suspicious.”

“I think it will be easier for you to talk to your mum first, I guess she will understand you better and probably help in telling your dad.”

“HmMMM, my mum will be mad at me too but I will give it a try. I just wish I can leave this house and go to another town but at the same time, my heart goes out to my family. They need to see the light.”

“Don't worry dear, God will do it.”

“I have to go now, my mum is calling me.”

“Ok dear. Take care, I am praying for you. Bye.”

“Bye.”

David and I scheduled to see today and as expected; I was clueless to the reason why he wanted to see me again. I had my suspicions, but I kept them to myself and though I looked forward to seeing him; I hid my excitement. He had suggested that we met at an eatery but I didn't want to get ideas into my head too soon. I wanted to keep it as official as possible so I opted for the church premises and he obliged.

“Hope I am free to call you Nnenna now?” David said as I sat down close to his seat.

“Why not? And I can also call you David right?”

“Sure, I was really beginning to feel that the title thing was too official, plus I love short names.”

We laughed as we exchanged pleasantries. We had some catching up to do and there was no better time than now but he was quick to go straight to the point.

“I learnt you and Pastor Emeka's family have been having cooperate prayers for the church for some months now. His wife told me about it and asked if I would like to join. I was thrilled when I heard about it and I gladly accepted. This is the kind of thing my heart has always longed for, but I just didn't know how to bring it to be. So from now on, I will be praying with you guys. Hope I am welcome by you?”

“Why not? The labourers are few remember.”

“Yea, thanks. The other thing is that I realized that a lot has happened to me in the past months. I believe God used you to teach me a lesson. You remember how I betrayed your trust and fought for you to be excommunicated. I actually thought I was doing the right thing then, I was too zealous but without knowledge.”

“I knew nothing of God's mercy and forgiveness but after that incident God thought me that His grace is without boundaries and I had no right to call unclean one whom He had cleaned up. I thought the church was a place for saints alone and anyone who didn't measure up should be brought to book. But I realized how sinful I was myself; it was pride, ignorance and self-righteousness all the way. Once again, I am sorry. God has opened my eyes to see that out of His fullness we have received grace and we must extend that grace to others continuously.” He continued.

“I don't know all that happened to you, but I must confess that your life is a great testimony and a blessing to many. I was amazed that you came back after all that happened and still showed love to the people that rejected you.” David spoke so softly, I was amazed.

“Well, I am amazed myself” I cut in. “Now I know that only God could have done it. I was wrong too. You know I was angry and even left the church, I complained, hated and was very bitter. I was also looking for a perfect church, one where there was no bitterness or sin forgetting that I was a sinner saved by Grace. God thought me that the perfect Church I was looking for was right here within me and within you.”

“You know most times we go outside in search of what is within us.” I continued, “God made me to understand that the triumphant church He speaks of in the bible is this very one we are seeing now. He is at work in His church and no man should ever speak against His church and call it ill when He hasn't said so. Thank God for Pastor Emeka and his wife, they helped me understand some of these truths. Indeed God is coming for a spotless Church, one that has no blemish or wrinkle but you know how impossible that is without Christ. It is only Jesus Christ that can do it and present us to Himself. All human efforts to 'purify' the church will always fail. The church is the bride of Christ, and only Christ can beautify her.”

“I understand you dear, and I know that many more people are coming to this same realization. The Holy Spirit is at work; opening eyes, changing lives, stirring hearts towards achieving the ultimate goal of Christ. I have let go of the past and I am glad we are both part of what God is doing and all that bothers me now is how to grow and also get more people to understand these things.”

“So how do we go about that?” He asked as his face lit.

“Prayers! Prayers of course and teaching. Apart from praying, we must teach as many as we can through our lives and our words too. We must stop complaining and join the Lord of the harvest as labourers in His vineyard. You know in our prayer group, we decided never to speak ill of the church, no matter what happens.”

“Yea, she told me that too.”

“That's another way of agreeing with God. Jesus never speaks ill of His bride. He loves her unconditionally just like the love a husband has for his wife and even more than that. No sensible husband will hate his wife just because she is presently sick, he still loves her anyway and even showers her with more love and care while doing everything he can to make sure she gets well. That should be our attitude too.”

“Wow! Thank you so much dear. I am amazed at what God is doing and like you said, thank God we are both part of it.”

“My dear, there is so much to know and do, it's not a day's job.” I laughed.

“Yea, you are right, it's a daily chase.”

“I wish I can speak more often with you every day, not just about the church but about life generally; get to know you more and more.”

“Know me more and more? When did I become the Holy Spirit or Jesus Christ?” I teased.

“Hahaha...no naa, you know what I mean.”

“I don't know o. You better explain yourself.” I said giggling.

“Well, let's get started already.”

With that we had a long hearty conversation and I really began to enjoy talking with David. He was truly a different man from the person I met few months back and we were getting along very fast.

Fatima was doing fine but I still worried about her as though I was her Saviour. She was really facing difficult times and there was nothing else I could do but pray. I had a hard time learning to trust God to come through for her.

She had begun working with her Dad's NGO and she was settling in just fine except that she was still unable to tell her family about her faith. What bothered

me the most was that she hadn't been to church in weeks.

She called in with lots of questions when she needed explanation about certain passages of the bible she didn't understand. I also sent her some audio messages to listen to.

Meanwhile, our services were taking a very different turn and everyone looked forward to it with great expectations.

Most of our programs were channeled towards reaching those who haven't heard the Gospel with the good news of Christ. We also partnered with other Churches irrespective of denomination in pulling resources together to preach the gospel in those places and it didn't matter which congregation the converts joined, everyone understood that we all have one Lord; what mattered most was that they came to Christ.

This made my heart glow!

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Chapter Twenty-Three

David and I spent the next couple of months getting to know each other, praying and learning from Pastor Emeka and his wife.

Our friendship had grown into something so beautiful it made my heart tremble. I knew where it was leading to but at the same time, I didn't want to assume.

One day after one of our prayer sessions with Pastor Emeka and his wife, Dave took my hands and spoke words that I would never forget:

“Nnenna, you have become the sunshine in my life. I would really want to embark on the journey of a lifetime with you. But first, will you let me take your hand so that together we will start a godly courtship that will lead us into the future God has prepared for us? I love you Nnem, I really do.”

While I was blown away, it came as no surprise to Pastor and his wife; David had spoken to them about asking me out and had gotten their counsel and consent. They cheered us as we had a warm, intimate hug that would be the beginning of precious memories we both treasure.

Pastor Emeka and his wife became our accountability partners and mentor. They guided us through the preparation process not just for courtship but for life after the wedding.

It was an exciting adventure that I looked forward to everyday. I was thrilled at the love that could be found in a godly relationship; it was so fulfilling and at the same time, I learnt more about God's love.

It was unbelievable how God poured so much love into my heart for a guy I once loathed and would have nothing to do with; I couldn't wrap my head around it either. It was as though the past never happened; God gave us a new slate with his love story beautifully written on it to write ours in between.

David showed me God's love in words and in deeds, I felt so undeserving at first and shrank from it but he kept reminding me of how none of us was a worthy recipient. Now the past and all that it held was something to laugh about and learn from, none of it held us back.

Two years later.

“We cannot tolerate such in our Church, this is a holy place and anyone that wants to be here must be holy.”

We both roared with laughter.

It was the morning of our one year wedding anniversary; David woke me up with a soft kiss saying the same words he had spoken three years ago when I was told to leave the church.

“Who would have believed that the beautiful woman I threw out of the church would be the same woman I now love with all my heart and have become one with?”

He continued as he reached for the bulge in my stomach, rubbing it gently.

“We should name her Grace, what do you think?”

“Well, I think it's a boy and that he looks exactly like you.” I giggled.

“Hmmm... Prophetess! I believe you; I will never doubt you again. Boy or girl, I

will love all our children like no other but you will always be first in my heart, no one will take your place.”

“Awww... I will always love you too honey.”

“So we are saving the surprise, right?”

“Yea, and you know how much I love surprises.”

“Of course I do, is it not you again?”

He moved to plant a kiss on my tummy and on and on he went. I couldn't help but thank God for the man He gave me.

After Fatima's parents got to know about her faith; they were deeply hurt and disappointed. All efforts they made to dissuade her failed even when her aunts and uncles were invited to talk to her. They made several attempts to make her denounce Christ and revert back to her family religion but she stood her ground and her father went ahead to disinherit her.

She had to fend for herself by working long hours to pay her bills. She also found other young people in her neighbourhood who were tired of religion, burnt out and seeking for freedom, she led them to Christ and they formed a small youth group.

She got married shortly after Dave and I wedded. Her husband was a devout Christian who loved her greatly and stood by her. Together, they taught the youth group in their church on Saturdays and disciplined them.

They met every week to talk about their challenges and how they were holding up. They also prayed together, supported each other and spread the good news in their neighborhood.

Though her parents remained Muslims, her two sisters later became Christians and just like the other time, their parents responded with severe opposition. They held on to their faith and continued believing God for the salvation of their parents.

The Lord's Holy Hill assembly International grew both in size and impact. Our youth wing became vibrant and instrumental in the transformation that took place in the Church.

We established a youth chapter in secondary schools geared towards disciplining them at a young age and exposing them to God's ways early in life. Each member of the youth wing was assigned three teenagers to pray for, teach and raise to become not just a believer but a disciple.

Many youths who were hurting found healing in Christ. The church was now a place of refuge where thirsty souls and hungry hearts found succor and strength. Nobody was judging anybody, we all understood that we were saved by the Grace of God and extended the same grace to others.

The elderly ones also taught the younger ones and always gave their wise counsel.

The love of God was palpable and contagious as we all shared everything in common and looked out for one another. We were one big happy family, saved by Grace and living for His glory while waiting for His return!

THE END.

About the Author



I am Chinaasa, the one whom Jesus loves. I am grateful for the finished work of Christ, passionate about not missing the simplicity that is in Christ Jesus and longing to spread the fragrance of Christ.

I love being a Pharmacist as much as I love writing and hence my passion for Nasalian blog. Let's connect on my website www.nasalian.com where you will find exiting contents and great love stories.

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Thank you for being my audience.