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INTRODUCTION

When Christ built His church, He built a praying church.

Is your church a praying church?

When Jesus made disciples, He made praying disciples.

What kind of disciples are you making?

The size of your ministry is determined by the size of your prayer life.

For what are you asking God?

The size of your prayer life is revealed by the size of your answers to prayer.

What size answers are you receiving?

God set the early church on fire with the manifest presence of Christ.

Is God setting your church on fire?

This book defines church the way Jesus defined church—as a house of prayer for all nations on fire with the manifest presence of Christ.

Two years ago my phone rang on a Sunday afternoon. “My name is Jack Sara, pastor of the only evangelical church in the old city of Jerusalem,” the man calling explained. “Several of us pastors here in Jerusalem have heard about the College of Prayer. We are desperate for God. We want to invite you to bring the College of Prayer to our land. If you are ever in Jerusalem, we would love to meet with you.”

“Ever in Jerusalem?” I laughed. “I’ll be there Tuesday!” I explained to Jack that while I had never previously been to Israel, after three years of planning, I would arrive that week with a team for a Holy Land prayer trip. He and I both marveled at the miraculous timing of his phone call.

Two days later I was sitting with a dozen pastors and leaders from Israel and Palestine, and these leaders invited the College of Prayer to return to Israel a month later to help the church in the Holy Land to experience a fresh encounter with Christ and help them become a praying church. I explained to them that while I was honored to be

invited to serve them in any way I could, there was no way that I could possibly return that year.

“We are desperate for God,” they explained. “We can’t wait until next year. We can’t even wait six months. The church in the Holy Land needs a genuine move of the Holy Spirit. We need a breakthrough. We need you to return next month to train us to reach a lost world through a revived church.” Needless to say, their desperation for God was impressive.

My wife and I fell in love with this group immediately. Our initial meeting with these leaders was the beginning of an ongoing kingdom partnership with some very special people. I have had the privilege of serving both local and regional churches all over the world through the College of Prayer, but the wholehearted earnestness and zeal of the church in the Holy Land is truly unique.

Since then my team and I have returned twice each year to serve the church in Israel. The biblical principles I have taught them are the same principles that are contained in this book. They are the very same principles that Jesus first taught right there in Israel and Palestine two thousand years ago. They are the principles that have shaped my local church in metro Atlanta and have been used to build Christ-exalting, nation-reaching, God-encountering churches in forty-one other countries of the world through the College of Prayer.

For the next thirty-one days, it will be my honor to stand with you in the same way I stand with the precious believers in Jerusalem. You will discover that not every day of our six-week adventure is of equal length, but each day is, nevertheless, of equal value. Some days require more reading, some more time in reflection. Take your time to fully engage with both the readings and the reflection questions. These kingdom principles will help you not only to build a praying church but will empower you to reach a lost world through a revived church.

If you have a gnawing hunger deep down in your belly for more of Christ,
if you want to see marriages healed,
if you want your children to see dramatic answers to specific prayers,
if you want to see people in your church and in your neighborhood set free from demonic bondages and self-destructive behavior,
if you want physical and emotional healings to be a daily occurrence,
if you want to see every member in your church experience firsthand the joy of leading a neighbor to Christ,

then I can assure you that you are in the right place!
And if you are a pastor who is putting in seventy-plus hours a week
with little to show for it,
if you have seen modest results but know that there is much more
where those came from,
if you are tired of spending all your energies just keeping the church
machinery moving,
if you have been working too hard and praying too little,
if you are ready to shift from focusing on what you do at church to
what God does,
if you want to build a praying church and make upper-room, God-
encountering disciples,
if you want to activate and utilize the revelatory gifts in your life and
in your church family,
if you want to equip your people to effectively reach their neighbors
and the nations,
then our thirty-one-day adventure has far-reaching potential both for
you and your church family.
Welcome to *church on fire!*

Now It's Your Turn: Action Steps

This book is intentionally called a thirty-one-day adventure because it is designed to take you places. This is not simply reading material or busy work; through it you will have an opportunity to move forward in your journey with Jesus. As you read it, you will be invited to encounter the manifest presence of Christ on a personal level; and as a gatekeeper in your local church, you will have an opportunity to include others with you in the adventure. Each week specific action steps are included just for your benefit.

Questions for Small Groups

Small group questions have been provided for each week of this adventure as well. If you lead a small group, select the questions that you would like to use from the list included after each week's adventure.

Advice for Pastors

Although this book has been written for ministry leaders of all kinds, it is particularly applicable to pastors. Since you are a leader, and since

leaders like to know where they are going, you may want to look ahead before reading this book at the “Advice for Pastors” section at the end of each week’s adventure.

Be blessed as you journey toward *church on fire!*

GET READY FOR FIRE

On the surface, church is what we do. It is the gathering together of Christ followers in order for us to love God, love each other and love our neighbors for Jesus' sake. Churches come in various shapes and sizes, but no matter how we slice it, our gathering is our effort to engage with God and His people.

Fire, on the other hand, is what God does. It is the initiative of the invisible God to demonstrate His supernatural power in tangible ways that we can all understand. Answers to prayer, physical healings, saved marriages, deliverance from evil strongholds, dramatic conversions and changed lives are all examples of fire. It is what happens when God comes to church. Point-blank, fire is the manifest presence of Christ.

Church on fire is what happens when what we do and what God does slam together. It is church the way God intended—where we become even more conscious of His presence among us than we are conscious of those with whom we gather.

Fire is what sets apart the church from the sports bar or the fitness center down the street. Any organization on earth can show what people can do; only the church can show what Christ can do. For this reason, whenever God is about to send the fire of His manifest presence, He always prepares His people in advance.

Welcome to an adventure of a lifetime. Week one is your get-ready-for-the-fire week, in which you will rebuild your own heart to seek after Christ. I hope that you are not only ready and eager—I also hope that you will bring others with you on this journey. In many ways the effectiveness of your entire thirty-one-day adventure depends on how thoroughly you allow Christ to get you ready during this first week. An Olympic gold medalist wins the center platform at the awards ceremony, not just at the sporting event, but in the months of preparation leading up to it. For the next thirty-one days, beginning with week one, we will aim to encounter the manifest presence of Christ and experience firsthand *church on fire*.

Day 1

START ASKING

If you want fire, you need to ask for it. God loves to come to where He is invited. He loves to manifest the reality of His flaming presence when we ask Him to do it. The prophet Elijah lowered the tip of his sword and drew a line in the sand one day as he defined a universal kingdom principle, one not only for the believers in his day but for your church and mine.

“The god who answers by fire—he is God” (1 Kings 18:24).

God was the God who answered by fire in Elijah’s day, and He is just as much the God who answers by fire in our day. The prophet Elijah proceeded to pray a remarkably simple prayer: “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O LORD, answer me so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again” (1 Kings 18:36–37). More than preaching this principle, Elijah practiced what he preached. He didn’t simply believe *in* fire, he believed *for* fire. He asked, and he received.

Perhaps the most shocking part of this prayer is that Elijah never specifically asked for fire. With everything riding on the outcome of his prayer, we would have expected him to pray for fire explicitly, but he never did—not for literal fire. What he requested was the manifest presence of God: “Let it be known today that you are God in Israel . . . so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God.” Elijah prayed for the manifest presence of God and the effect that the manifest presence of God would have on the people—that they would know that God was “turning their hearts back again.”

Not only did fire fall that day, but hearts and lives were turned back to the Lord.

Do you want the fire of God’s manifest presence to fall again in your church? Are you asking God for fire?

Headline News from Jerusalem

Headline News provides breaking news from the Middle East. Allow me to share with you a story of good news that you may not have heard from Headline News, CNN or any other news outlet.

I stood in the middle of the only evangelical church in the old city of Jerusalem on a Sunday in August 2013, and I was thoroughly overwhelmed as the atmosphere exuded the presence of Christ. Small groups of believers were huddled together all around me in God-encountering prayer and worship. Some knelt. Some stood. Many wept as spontaneous prayers of repentance rose from around the room. We gathered that day in the building where they worship every Sunday, just off the Via Dolorosa, only a couple hundred meters or so from the place where many believe Jesus died. On this particular day these dear believers were wholeheartedly crying out to God, asking Him to make them a house of prayer for all nations and to empower them again to build an upper-room, “God-encountering prayer meeting” in their city. As I stood among them, I too wept tears of overwhelming gratitude.

I knew that I was standing on holy ground—smack dab in the middle of Jerusalem, the crossroads of civilization. Christ was pouring into these people His Holy Spirit, activating the gifts of His Spirit, clothing the church with power so He could thrust its members out to be His witnesses right there in Jerusalem. He would use them to win many to faith in Christ—Catholics, Armenians, Muslims, Orthodox and Jews. This church was alive—alive in prayer, alive to God’s manifest presence and alive to fulfill the purpose of Christ in its generation. I shook my head in wonder as God moved among its people. Christ was rebuilding the upper-room, God-encountering prayer meeting in the same city in which He had built the very first upper-room prayer gathering.

Of all the churches the College of Prayer has served around the world, I know of none more alive in worship, more fervent in prayer, more desperate for Christ, more active in the revelatory gifts and more effective at reaching lost people for Christ than this congregation in Jerusalem. Many pastors throughout Israel and Palestine tell me that this evangelical church within the Old City is probably the only church in the land that is effectively seeing significant numbers from the majority group of Palestinian people come to faith in Christ. It is no wonder that they are so fruitful in soul winning, since they are doing church ministry the way Jesus told them to do it.

This particular move of God on this Sunday morning in this strategic location did not happen in a vacuum. It was part of a sustained move of God that had been developing over many years. God had prepared these people to ask, and they had been asking fervently. Now they are receiving, and they are receiving fully. The God who answers by fire is answering the prayers of these dear believers today.

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

I didn't always know how to receive fire, let alone lead others into the fire of Christ's manifest presence. When I finished graduate school, I began serving as pastor of my first church. After less than a year in my new ministry, I woke up in the middle of one night with severe chest pains. I could hardly breathe. I thought I was dying. My wife dialed 911. The rescue unit came and rushed me to the hospital. I was diagnosed with two problems: heart fibrillation and severe indigestion. My heart was beating so fast that it was almost vibrating, but it was not effectively pumping blood through my body. The indigestion was caused by the onion rings and Coke I'd had at midnight. Not a good combination! My church had tripled in size, though that's not saying much, as we had grown from twenty-three members to seventy-five. My cardiologist, however, told me that I was suffering from battle fatigue and that unless I wanted to die before I turned thirty, I needed to slow down. God told me that I was working too hard and praying too little.

I knew that I needed to learn to pray, so I registered for a revival-prayer conference with J. Edwin Orr and Armin Gesswein. On separate days I took both men out for lunch. I felt like a little bird with my mouth wide open, waiting to eat up any morsels that these godly men dropped in my direction. This began a lifelong relationship with both men, particularly with Armin Gesswein.

Armin had been the first prayer leader at Billy Graham's crusades. When Billy preached in Los Angeles and led so many Hollywood movie stars to Christ in 1949, he preached in one tent to ten thousand people, while Armin Gesswein simultaneously led a prayer meeting in a separate tent with two thousand intercessors. Over the years Armin had mentored many leaders in prayer, including Bill Bright, Chuck Smith, Ray Ortlund, Ted Engstrom, Robert Schuller and scores of others.

As he and I ate lunch together, Armin stuck out his long, bony finger over his large bowl of romaine lettuce and said to me with a half smile,

“If you want to learn to pray, you need to pray.” He let that statement sink in and then added, “Start where the disciples started with the short and simple prayer, ‘Lord, teach us to pray’” (Luke 11:1). “It may be the shortest prayer you’ll ever pray,” he added, “only five words—but it’s the most important prayer you’ll ever pray.” Over the next seventeen years, I would hear Armin say that same thing at least a hundred times. “Once God teaches you to pray,” he added as we finished lunch, “you can receive from Him anything He wants you to have.”

I returned to my church south of Miami, Florida, with a new prayer: “Lord, teach us to pray.” I prayed it forcefully, and I prayed it often. I taught my church leaders and my entire congregation to pray it. I have now taught literally millions of believers around the world to pray these five words.

“Lord, teach us to pray” is a prayer that God loves to hear. It’s as if when He hears these five words from a hungry heart, He turns His head to listen.

“Lord, teach us to pray” is asking the right person the right question—the question He has been waiting to hear. The fact is that none of us knows how to pray as we ought (see Rom. 8:26). There are not two groups of people in the world—those who don’t know how to pray as they ought and those who do. There are only those who don’t know how to pray as they ought and those who think they do, and the latter group is wrong. We don’t even start praying correctly until we admit that we don’t know how to pray correctly and, more specifically, until we ask God for help. No one can teach us to pray the way God can.

“Lord, teach us to pray” does not say, “Lord, teach us about prayer.” It specifically asks God to activate us to true prayer.

“Lord, teach us to pray” is a corporate prayer request. Many of us have privatized prayer. Of course, prayer initially rises from us as individuals, but the thrust of this five-word prayer of the disciples, and the thrust of this book, is the same as the New Testament thrust of corporate prayer. The “us” of “Lord, teach us to pray” is the reason Jesus called for a house of prayer and not for individual apartments. It’s the reason we are called a royal priesthood and not just a bunch of private priests. This is why Jesus said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matt. 18:20). Christ wants us to come together, to come together in corporate prayer. He wants our gatherings to be full of prayer so that we can be full of His presence. This is the essence of *church on fire*.

Now It's Your Turn: Day 1 Action Step

“Lord, teach us to pray” is a spark that lights the flame of *church on fire*. These five words are not magic, but they are biblical. You and your church family will want to pray them regularly, even daily. As you do, God will indeed teach you to pray and open up to you a whole new world. Since fire is God’s work, not yours, ask Him today to send fire as you pray the following biblical promises. Take your time. Read each verse carefully. Ask God to put in your spirit an ever-increasing desire to pray.

The God who answers by fire—he is God. (1 Kings 18:24)

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1)

I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (11:9–10)

If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (11:13)

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. (Isa. 55:6)

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. (James 4:8, NASB)

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb. 11:6)

Lord Jesus, what You are teaching me today is _____

Lord Jesus, the action step that I will take is _____

Day 2

GET HUNGRY

Health and hunger go hand in hand. This principle is true in both the physical and spiritual realms. When I was in high school, my mother knew that if I lost my appetite, it was for only one of two possible reasons: I was either sick, or I was in love! When we lose our appetite for Christ, it means that we are either spiritually sick, or we are in love with something other than Christ. Spiritual health and spiritual hunger are inseparably linked.

The hungrier we are, the healthier we are, and the hungrier we are, the better we pray. Hunger for God is always part of the get-ready-for-revival preparatory work of God. “Hunger is the best cook,” the great Reformer Martin Luther said.¹ Luther knew from experience what he was talking about.

Hunger for God is itself the work of God. The Bible says that no one seeks after God (see Rom. 3:11). This means that when we start to seek God, it is always because God sounded the appetite alarm within us. When God creates hunger for Himself in one person, it is often an indicator that God is creating a similar hunger for Himself within others around that person as well. If you and your people have a gnawing pain in the pit of your stomach to encounter more of Christ, you may be closer to a breakthrough than you think.

Hunger and Desperation

I have never met anyone hungrier for God than Moise Guindo, president of the Christian and Missionary Alliance church in Mali, West Africa. He led seven hundred churches with a total of seventy thousand baptized believers.² When I first met him, he had been sitting on his moped at a fork in a dirt road on the edge of the Sahara Desert, eagerly awaiting our arrival, for two hours. He escorted us to the best hotel in town, which had dirt floors, no air-conditioning, no running water and no toilet. After we finished all the African protocol greetings, we sat down kneecap to kneecap. Moise took my hands, looked me straight in the eyes and with the deepest sincerity I had ever felt, simply said, “We need God!”

He dropped to his knees and said with tears, “I cannot lead these people unless the Holy Spirit comes and manifests His presence among us.”

As we held hands, he wept. His tears hit the dirt floor, and to this day I can still see the darkened spots that his tears made on the ground. The level of desperation in his soul was palpable. I can still feel the intensity, sincerity, humility and guilelessness of his heart. I have never before nor since sensed anything like it. I breathed a prayer: “Lord, You owe this man revival.”³ I knew that God was about to do something extraordinary, and He did. That week I witnessed an extraordinary move of the Holy Spirit among the massive group of several hundred pastors. I saw high worship, deep repentance, confession of sin, breaking of demonic strongholds, receiving of the infilling of the Holy Spirit and empowerment for ministry before the pastors returned to their assignments throughout their country.

On one occasion that week, we engaged in eight hours of nonstop repentance. I will never forget watching grown men weep like school children as they humbled themselves in the presence of a holy God. We heard every imaginable sin confessed that day. Don’t think that this was merely an emotional or superficial response; it was deep, life changing and long lasting. When my team returned two years later, those same pastors were still walking in victory and freedom.

The Hourglass Vision

You may be thinking, *I’m not as desperate for the Lord as Moise was*. Not so fast. Before you underestimate your hunger and desperation for God, you need to realize that there are two doorways to desperation, and both doorways are equally valid:

- The front door to desperation = a pitiful present
- The back door to desperation = a preferred future

Many churches enter into desperation through the front door of a pitiful present. Things are so bad in their circumstances that unless God breaks through, they are doomed to utter failure. Churches in the Middle East, Africa, China and Southeast Asia, as well as parts of Latin America, are so overwhelmed by the external forces of religious oppression or the internal forces of sin, selfishness and immorality that they have entered into desperation for God by the front door.

Churches in North America, Europe, Australia and other well-off parts of the world, however, are entering desperation through the back door. They see a preferred future—they recognize that there is far more that God has for them than what they are currently experiencing. The church in South Korea has perhaps the most vibrant prayer movement on earth today. Its people pray with great zeal, urgency and intensity. It is also the fastest-growing missionary church on earth. Their desperation for God is not because of a pitiful present but rather a preferred future—they see more that God wants to do through them.

My friend Chip Henderson is lead pastor of the largest church in Mississippi. He is in the midst of transforming his church into a praying church. He and his leadership team are desperate for God, not because things are going poorly but because they have a vision for so much more that they want from God.

Both doors to desperation bring us to the same conclusion: we do not have what it takes within ourselves to meet the challenges and opportunities in front of us. God alone has what it takes. Prayer is the way we access God's resources.

One day as I was praying, I saw a most disturbing picture. I saw an hourglass. The bottom of the glass represented the vast needs of people, and I began to weep over the wounds of hurting, lost people and over the lukewarm church that seemed impotent to meet their needs. The top of the hourglass represented God's endless resources—all His redemptive provision. I became even more overwhelmed. "What can I do to open up the constriction in the middle of the glass to get the unlimited redemptive resources of God at the top down more quickly to meet the needs of the people on the bottom?" I asked God. "Why is God not flowing faster to meet the needs of the people? Why is the middle of the hourglass so constricted?" The Lord answered me, "The constriction in the middle is the lack of prayer in the church." I wept and wept.

I have seen this hourglass picture while praying dozens of times since then. Each time my burden of desperation grows greater. The bottom of the glass is a picture of the front door to desperation, representing the overwhelming needs of people. The top of the hourglass is a picture of the back door to desperation, representing the resources and the redemption of Christ. Both the top and the bottom of the glass, both the front and the back door, move us to want to cry out in desperation for the redemptive resources of God to more rapidly meet the needs of hurting, lost people around us.