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PROLOGUE

The upper room is the closest place to heaven on earth. In the upper room we gather to encounter Christ, and, more importantly, it is where Christ encounters us. From the moment we are born again by the Holy Spirit, the upper room is home. It becomes the due north on our internal compass, and sooner or later we will find our way there. In the upper room we meet with the Father, and there we are more ourselves than anywhere else on earth—no masks, no pretense, no posing. In the upper room, we experience firsthand the unconditional love of the Father, and there He breaks off from us rejection, alienation, loneliness, abandonment, self-hatred, anxiety, fear, and insignificance; more importantly, it is there He convinces us of our acceptance, security, and significance in Christ. For this reason, it is in the upper room where we receive our life calling and discover the reason we were born.

Let's be honest, when we hear *upper room*, we might think of an attic storage space where we put our junk—all the stuff

we will never use again but we don't want to throw away. In the western world, the upper room is a rarely visited place, essentially irrelevant to day-to-day life. For most of the rest of the world, however, and particularly in the first-century Holy Land, the upper room was the family room, the man cave, the preferred action spot in the home. It was an open-air social space on the roof where family and friends would gather at the end of a long day to tell stories, laugh at jokes, sip tea, and reflect on life. The typical Mediterranean square building architecture provided a rooftop that was ideal for an outdoor bonus room that was private and protected. To this day, particularly in a land where virtually every other room in the house is already maxed-out and where the climate is normally comfortable, the open-air upper room is not only useful but refreshing.

It was this upper room that Jesus utilized as his go-to gathering place with His disciples. Here Jesus got His hands dirty washing the disciples' feet and eating delicious lamb chops at their final Passover meal. Even following His brutal murder, the back-to-life Jesus once again met with His disciples in this same upper room. But this was only the beginning; Christ is about to elevate the upper room to an even higher level of importance. The upper room was about to become the only place on earth where Father God would pour out His conspicuous presence. This upper room was the crown jewel of Jesus' discipleship ministry.

When you think about it, the only thing Jesus left behind on earth was a prayer meeting. He never started a training institute or university. He never wrote a book or even a manual. He never ran for office and never marshaled an army. After three unprecedented years of high-impact ministry, it

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trained more than 3.5 million pastors and Christian leaders in sixty-four nations through a ministry I work with, the College of Prayer International. Several of the largest church networks on earth have invited us to help them build their upper-room, Christ-encountering prayer environments. I will provide breaking news stories about how praying churches are reaching some of the final unreached people on earth—from the upper room to the nations. One of the greatest honors of my life is to serve this movement, and it is my privilege to now pass on these same kingdom principles to you.

MY TURNING POINT

As a young pastor I thought I was dying. I awoke in the middle of the night with extreme chest pains and severe shortness of breath. My wife, Sherry, dialed 9-1-1. We were both convinced I was suffering a cardiac arrest. I was rushed to the hospital, and an hour later I was diagnosed with two problems—heart fibrillation and severe acid indigestion. My indigestion was the result of having onion rings and a diet Coke at midnight, something I would never do again! The heart fibrillation was more complicated—it was caused by working too hard. As a young pastor, I wanted to grow my church even if it killed me, and unfortunately it almost did. My small church had tripled in size, which isn't saying much—we grew from twenty-three to seventy members. My cardiologist told me, "Fred, if you want to live to be thirty, you're going to have to slow down." God told me, "*Fred, you are working too hard and praying too little.*" This crisis turned into a breaking point for me. It exposed within me the deadly trifecta of arrogance, selfish ambition, and prayerlessness. My inner life felt hollow, my spiritual life felt shallow, and my

ministry life felt exhausting. *This is not what I signed on for*, I told myself. *Something has to change!* Although I loved Jesus with all my heart, I was in trouble at the core of my spiritual life. God heard my heart cry.

I registered for a revival prayer conference with J. Edwin Orr and Armin Gesswein. It was just what I needed. I developed a life-long friendship with both distinguished leaders, and over the next twenty years, Armin Gesswein became my spiritual mentor. I began traveling all over the world with Armin. I am a gatherer, so I would gather spiritually hungry God-seekers on college and university campuses across our nation and in cities around the world. Most importantly, Armin introduced me to the upper room. He also taught me to begin praying that short but dangerous prayer—“*Lord, teach us to pray.*” That tiny five-word prayer radically changed my life. Armin used to say, “It’s one of the smallest prayers you will ever pray, and yet, it is one of the biggest—when God answers this prayer, you can receive anything from God He wants you to have.” When the disciples first asked, “Lord, teach us to pray,”² that request eventually led them to their upper room. That same request eventually led me to the upper room, as well.

THE HANDSHAKE

I want to direct your attention to one of my all-time favorite photographs—a picture of two of my heroes and mentors. You will certainly recognize the man on the right, Billy Graham. The man on the left is the person who introduced Dr. Graham to the upper room—Armin Gesswein. In many ways this photograph illustrates the genius of the upper room. You can see in their faces the obvious affection and profound respect they had for each other. What I want you to focus on, however, is

not their faces, but their handshake. There are handshakes, and there are handshakes, and this one contains more history and significance than most.



Armin Gesswein and Billy Graham enjoying their lifelong friendship.

I want you to keep looking at the handshake. On the surface, all we see are two old guys joining hands; what we don't see is the dynamic connection between the life calling of both men. Armin Gesswein is called by many "the father of the modern prayer movement." As we all know, Billy Graham preached the gospel to more people than anyone in history—nearly 215 million people in live audiences through his 417 Crusades in 185 countries. Through his Crusades the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association recorded more than 33 million professions of faith in Christ. It's no wonder the Gallup poll listed Dr. Graham as one of the "10 Most Admired Men in the World" a record sixty-one times—more than any person in history.³

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their calling because they both encountered Christ. They faithfully lived out their calling from the upper room to the nations.

Both men obviously prayed and both men preached; neither excluded the other, but their influence brought a much-needed emphasis to their particular areas of expertise. One without the other would have fallen flat, but both together brought dynamic synergy that proved epic in their influence and effect in the world.

Armin Gesswein

Upreach

Revival in the church

Ever-deepening love relationship

Fullness

Billy Graham

Outreach

Evangelism in the world

Ever-expanding love relationship

Fulfillment

In many ways this handshake bears a wonderful resemblance of an iconic painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. Pope Julian II commissioned Michelangelo, a creative genius, to paint the ceiling as an oversized fresco. Of the nine scenes in the middle of the ceiling, the most duplicated is *The Creation of Adam*, and its most riveting feature is the hand of God and the hand of Adam that meet together in the middle with the unforgettable touch of their forefingers. Those touching fingers represent the point of contact between heaven and earth, between God and humankind, between the mortal and the immortal. This point of contact is what the upper room is all about. What is embodied in that fingertip connection on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome is what is reflected in the handshake between these two men. This handshake vividly expresses the dynamic partnership between prayer and evangelism that takes us from the upper room to the

nations. The handshake between Armin Gesswein and Billy Graham represents the fusion of prayer and evangelism, between heaven and earth, between God's work in us and God's work through us.

MY COMMITMENT

In writing this book I want to make three commitments to you.

I will shoot straight. No one is more brutally honest than Jesus. I must admit that I used to hate it when God would rebuke me; but now I love it because I know that He disciplines, rebukes, and corrects those He loves. I will do my best to do the same. Literally everything I have learned about encountering Christ, I have learned in repentance. I have made just about every mistake there is to make when it comes to prayer. I have never met a natural-born pray-er; at least, I know that I am not one of them. Christ is, however, a most patient and gracious teacher.

I will keep it real. I have learned not to fake it when I pray. Jesus loved everyone, but He could not relate to phonies. Jesus always treated hypocrites with suspicion. God wants to teach each of us to keep it real when we pray; it does not take long until we realize that we become the best version of ourselves in Christ-encountering prayer. We are more ourselves in the upper room than anywhere else on earth. For this reason, the best friends we will ever make are friends we make in the upper room, as long as we keep it real.

I will, by the grace of God, take us deep. Life is too short to dabble. God did not send His Son to be brutally murdered for me and you so that we might dabble. Jesus is not pursuing a superficial relationship with us; He wants to go deep. The

world will never be changed by dabblers. The upper room is not for the faint of heart, not for people who want to remain superficial and maintain a casual, arms-length relationship with Christ. We were not made to spend our lives in the shallow end of the kiddie pool. If you are ready to go deep, welcome to the upper room!

I need to tell you a secret: I used to hate prayer meetings. They literally gave me the creeps! Sitting still with my eyes closed felt very strange. Listening to people talk in strange voices, as if they were speaking through a synthesizer or as if they were trying out for a school play, was definitely not my thing. It made God seem distant and formal, and it made the entire experience of corporate prayer feel phony and awkward. Perhaps you have had an experience like this and have come to the conclusion that all corporate prayer is this way. You can breathe a sigh of relief. I'm not even sure God attends prayer meetings like that! The prayer meeting Jesus started in Jerusalem was anything but boring, and the one He is calling you into won't be, either. In fact, it is where Christ will ignite your calling. In chapter 1, we will discover why the upper room is such a big deal.

You are certainly free to continue reading this book alone, but for greatest enjoyment and maximum impact, you may want to consider inviting a few friends to join you. This is a seven-week adventure, and a seven-week small group might be advantageous. For this reason, we prepared a seven-week Ignite Group Guide that is included at the end. In fact, learning these kingdom principles all by yourself is almost contrary to everything the upper room represents. Jesus established the upper room as a corporate prayer gathering

because spiritual growth is always best when it is cultivated in community.

UPPER ROOM KINGDOM PRINCIPLES *REVIEW*

The upper room is the closest place to heaven on earth.

From the moment we are born again, the upper room is home.

The upper room is the crown jewel of Jesus' discipleship ministry.

The only thing Jesus left behind on earth was a prayer meeting.

It's just like God to pick the common, everyday things of life and make them extraordinary.

It's not the place, but the presence, that makes the upper room.

The upper room is God's call to go deeper.

You are more yourself in the upper room than anywhere else on earth.

Life is too short to dabble.



Chapter One

THE AXIS OF POWER

*I would rather teach one man to pray
than ten men to preach.*

—Charles Spurgeon

*To be full of the Holy Spirit is to be full of prayer;
to be full of prayer is to be full of the Holy Spirit.*

—Armin Gesswein

The axis of power, or the place of greatest history-shaping influence on earth, is not the White House in Washington, DC, nor the United States government or military. It is not Wall Street with their financial muscle, nor Hollywood with their opinion-maker influence, nor Silicon Valley with their technological cutting-edge. The axis of power is not the Kremlin in Moscow, the Ayatollah in Iran, the European Union, nor the British Parliament. As impressive as each of these global forces are, they do not even come

close to exerting the greatest influence on earth. The axis of greatest power, as unlikely as it may appear, and the place that exerts the most influence in shaping the flow of human history is the upper room. Yes, the upper-room, Christ-encountering prayer gathering, as harmless and unassuming as it may seem, wields the greatest influence in directing the course of human history. This is a big claim, and I will do my best to prove it. First, let me illustrate it.

PUDDLES OF TEARS

When we entered the room where the Ethiopian Christian leaders were gathered, we had no idea what we were walking into. Don't get me wrong—we had been thorough in doing our research. When the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church (EKHC) asked us to help them rebuild their upper rooms, or what they call Prayer Centers, we Googled their church network. We were immediately impressed watching YouTube videos of their massive prayer rallies with ten to twenty thousand people praying virtually nonstop for three days. Their passion was palpable, and their authenticity was infectious. As we did more research, we were shocked by their sheer size. Get this: Ethiopia has a population of approximately one hundred million, and ten million are in the EKHC—a full ten percent of the entire population! But it was not until we stepped into their national office located in the capital city of Addis Ababa, directly across the street from the African Union, that we were completely blown away. When we arrived, their church leaders were on their knees and had already been praying for two hours. There was nothing phony about it—quite the contrary. Their extraordinary hunger for God, their zeal in prayer, and their affection for Jesus were breathtaking.

We were crammed into the room with all their chiefs—zone leaders, district leaders, seminary leaders, women’s leaders, children’s leaders—who provided leadership for ten million Ethiopian Christians. Talk about feeling small, humble, and unworthy! I sat there with my mouth open in wide-eyed wonder. I actually felt a little intimidated and thought, *What do I have to give these people? They certainly already have the Holy Spirit, and they surely know how to pray effectively! They don’t need motivation; in fact, they are more hungry for God than I am. What do I have to offer these precious people?* As I humbled myself, God spoke to me very clearly, “I brought you here for a reason. Don’t look to yourself—look to me! I will make it clear what you have to give to them. Just make sure you receive from me while you are here, and before you leave, be sure to give me all the glory.” Simple enough.

They sang with such whole-hearted intensity that the decibel level vibrated my ears as if I was standing on a tarmac next to a roaring jet engine. When I asked an Ethiopian pastor to lead in a brief opening prayer, he virtually came alive! His face lit up, and he proceeded to pray fervently for forty-five minutes. So much for a brief opening prayer! I broke a sweat just watching him. He talked with God, the King of the universe, in such a natural manner that it was obvious that God was both his Father and his best friend.

What happened next is something I will never forget as long as I live. God’s presence entered the room, and we all became instantly aware of it. Men and women all over the room spontaneously knelt on the floor with their faces on the linoleum, sobbing over their sins. Their prayers of bone-crushing repentance were deep, prolonged, and extensive—gut-wrenching to witness! As I looked around the room,

I saw puddles of tears on the linoleum floor underneath every kneeling person. I had never before seen so many high-level leaders who carried such influence and leadership become so vulnerable and transparent. As they humbled themselves, it was as if they became a low-pressure zone in the spiritual atmosphere as the storm cloud of the Holy Spirit came and hovered over them. The more they repented, the closer God came in His mighty presence. The more their hearts broke in genuine sorrow for their sin, the more heaven broke open with an impartation of cleansing, refreshment, and renewed empowerment. To this day, I am in awe of how God turned our small seminar with church leaders into an upper room crowned with humility in repentance and power for anointing for ministry. I knew at the time that God would use these humble people to impact their nation in a deeper way. And He most definitely has.

That was three years ago. I have traveled with our team to Ethiopia twice each year since then. I have had a front-row seat to be able to witness the presence of Christ not only change the church but also begin to transform their nation. Last year when we returned, these same high-level leaders met with us in the same room, and one after another they shared their victory stories with us.

- One region in the south had over a thousand local congregations, and yet they had not sent out a single missionary. Within a year of introducing them to upper-room, Christ-encountering prayer, they have already sent out a dozen missionaries and have plans to send one hundred more over the next few years. The EKHC is now seeing similar activation throughout their vast church network.

- Another region had not planted a church in years, but after introducing Christ-encountering prayer, they led 68,000 people to Christ and have planted almost one hundred new churches.
- In Western Ethiopia, persecuted Christians were praying for one of the Muslim mosques responsible for much of the terrorism. All they did was pray, and one day a lightning bolt struck the minaret on the mosque and broke it in half. Sometime later, when the Muslim Imam grabbed his microphone to call for prayer over the loud speaker, he shouted “Allah Akbar,” but out from the speakers on the top of the mosque came the words, “Jesus is Lord.” Befuddled, he tried again, “Allah Akbar,” but the same words came out, “Jesus is Lord.” Within moments, hundreds of angry Muslim men ran into the mosque and wanted to beat the Muslim leader. Someone else grabbed the microphone and cried, “Allah Akbar,” and once again, they had the same result: out of the P.A. system came the words, “Jesus is Lord.” We have been told since then that they had the entire system rewired by a new sound technician, but the result was the same—Jesus is Lord!

In addition to training church leaders, we also consistently meet with the leaders from the Ethiopian Parliament and military. There are more than one hundred members of Parliament who are born again, and they all now participate in upper rooms. In fact, they have started eleven upper rooms, or prayer centers, just for the Parliament. They meet every week and pray nonstop for six hours. The Ethiopian military now has forty upper rooms of prayer. While the military branches of most