

An Excerpt from

*Living Well is the Best Revenge*

the debut novel from Elle Bailey

Chapter 8  
Faith for the Journey

*Living Well is the Best Revenge* is available at [iuniverse.com](http://iuniverse.com) and Barnes & Noble

LIVING WELL IS THE BEST REVENGE (C) 1997 REVISED 2008 ELLE BAILEY.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

## Chapter 8

### Faith for the Journey

Eager to revive her spiritual life, Charlene, her kids in tow, returned to the only church she'd attended since moving to Chicago. It was Pierre's childhood church, Eastern Star Missionary Baptist Church. Her first Sunday in attendance happened to be the annual commencement celebration. So everyone, parents and children alike, worshipped together in the main sanctuary.

Ever the back row Baptist, Charlene and the kids found seats near the rear of the sanctuary and settled in for the service. From their vantage point, Charlene could observe the entire service.

The service started with the Call to Worship led by the Youth Pastor, Thomas Carlton. Following the liturgy, he signaled for the ushers to start the processional. As instructed, they opened the doors of the church, the audio technician cued up Sir Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1* and the cap and gown-wearing graduates marched down the center aisle to their reserved seats at the front of the sanctuary. The grand march included honorees from every level – kindergarten, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, high school, college and graduate school. It was great to see that the church had so many congregants as scholars. It showed that they valued education at the church. *That's definitely a plus*, Charlene decided.

Once the procession concluded, Deacon Felder approached the podium and read a scripture from Isaiah. Afterwards, he entreated the parishioners to come to the altar for prayer. While the kids remained in their seats, Charlene joined the others at the front of the church.

Fifty or so people gathered 'round the altar. Some stood, others knelt. All bowed their heads as the senior deacon, Deacon DeVoe prayed.

"Father, I stretch my hands to thee. No other help I know. If thou withdraw thyself from me, oh, where shall I go?" DeVoe said, starting the petition as he had on many other occasions.

Though her eyes should have been closed to facilitate concentration on the corporate prayer, Charlene's eyes were wide with alarm. She was mortified by some of the attire being worn by many of the sisters in the service.

Plunging necklines would have been an improvement in some cases as she noticed sisters sporting spaghetti straps, halters and in one case a strapless dress. *That's waaaay too much skin to show in the sanctuary*, she thought. And as bad as the peek-a-boo blouses and dresses were, the jaw-dropping low-rider jeans were

even worse. There were a few sisters whose candy apple red G-strings and hot pink panties were in full view since they'd chosen to kneel for the prayer.

"*Oh...my...gosh...*," Charlene whispered to herself as she scanned the crowd.

Though she hoped their eyes were watching God, Charlene covered the brothers in prayer just the same.

"*Lord, please help these brothers up here,*" she prayed silently. "*Cause I know none of this has been lost on them.*" She shook her head in disbelief. "*Lead 'em not into temptation, Lord. Don't let 'em start lusting up here at the altar. This is my prayer. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*"

"Amen," said Deacon DeVoe.

Fortunately for Charlene, their prayers ended at the same time.

As she returned to her seat, Charlene couldn't help processing the scene. *What would make some of these sisters step out of the house wearing these outfits knowing they were coming to church?* she wondered. *Clearly, body glove blouses and painted on jeans are not "church clothes". In fact, they wouldn't even pass the "Turn Around Test",* Charlene reasoned. As a child, she'd hated the dreadful Turn Around Test. But as a woman and mother, she fully appreciated it. That's why she made Kendall take the Turn Around Test every time they went shopping for new clothes. Whenever she went into the fitting room to try on a new outfit, she made Kendall *turn around* so that she could see how the clothes fit across her backside. Any outfit that was too clingy or revealing went back on the rack in favor of a bigger size or a different style altogether.

The altar call was followed by the presentation of colors by the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. When the flags were properly displayed, the troops led the congregation in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance which was followed by the Pledge to the Bible. Like many others, Charlene read it from the monitors while the scouts recited it from memory.

In unison, they said, "I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God's Holy Word, I will make it a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path and I will hide its words in my heart that I might not sin against God. Amen."

With both pledges finished, the scouts and congregants took their seats and the service continued.

While the Courtesy Guild welcomed guests and visitors to the church, Charlene's thoughts returned to the issue of attire. Based on the designer labels hanging off the sisters' hips, it was obvious that affordability was not a factor. The next plausible reason for the fashion hits and misses was lack of knowledge. *People perish for lack of knowledge.* As she considered the proverb, Charlene was thankful that she'd been raised by a woman of virtue who'd taught her to dress and carry herself in the same manner, a manner that didn't cause others to stumble or sin. More importantly, she'd been taught that she didn't have to advertise to catch a man's roaming eye because the eyes of the Most High God are on her all the time. And He's more important than any man she could ever meet. Unfortunately, it appeared that many of the sisters hadn't been taught the same lesson. Once upon a time, make-up, pierced earrings, tattoos, ankle bracelets, red lipstick, red nail polish, plunging necklines, short hemlines, stiletto heels and fishnet stockings were things associated with worldly women. As she surveyed the nearby pews, Charlene realized that every other woman was wearing some combination of the once taboo trimmings. And in some cases it seemed that attention-getting was the name of the game.

Though Charlene had been an early adopter of casual Fridays at work, she wasn't so sure she liked the idea of casual Sundays at church. After all, she knew of restaurants with stricter dress codes than the Church. And while it's true, God looks at the heart and Jesus accepts everyone as is, Charlene believed there was something to be said for reverence. Because the house of the Lord is sacred, Charlene believed it should be treated as such. She believed that it should not be relegated to the same level as other venues meaning some things worn to school or work, a concert hall or a nightclub were not necessarily appropriate for church. Perhaps that belief was a bit prudish, but Charlene was entitled to her opinion nonetheless.

The media presentation of the announcements brought Charlene back to reality. However, the sight of a kid sipping a CapriSun, a teenager sending a text message and a grown man leaving the sanctuary to answer his cell phone all left her scratching her head. Sure enough, she'd done her share of chewing gum and passing notes and falling asleep in church when she was coming up. But there were adults policing the situation to keep things under control back then. Now, it seemed, that was not the case. Folks were walking and talking and doing their thing right in the middle of service. Given all the distractions, Charlene concluded that with the passing of the church mothers, so went the passing of lessons in church etiquette. As a result, she worked hard to focus on the Lord and enjoy the worship experience.

The youth choir, Perfected Praise, was singing an up-tempo Kirk Franklin number when Charlene rejoined the worship service. It was obvious which kids had missed rehearsal. They couldn't keep up with the choreography. She smiled and looked over at Nic and Kendall to gauge their reaction to the choir. In addition to finding ministries and auxiliaries that would benefit her, she'd have to find ministries and activities to meet their spiritual needs as well.

When the song ended, Pastor Carlton and the Senior Pastor, Dr. John Jeffries, took to the stage to introduce the graduating class to the congregation. Like the others, they were decked out in academic regalia. Dr. Jeffries appeared to be especially proud of his student-members as he shook hands with and hugged many of them while they lined up for the mock graduation ceremony.

From the dais, Pastor Carlton announced the names of the graduates one by one. There were nearly 30 in all. As each candidate came forward, Dr. Jeffries presented him or her with a certificate of achievement. In addition, First Lady Jeffries presented the college-bound high school graduates with Bibles and scholarships courtesy of their church family.

Alongside the professional photographer, parents and friends eagerly jockeyed for position so they could get photos of their loved ones as they accepted their gifts from the pastor and first lady.

When all of the students had been recognized, the group received a standing ovation from the congregation and they were joined by Dr. and Mrs. Jeffries and Pastor Carlton for a class photo.

The entire ceremony took less than 20 minutes, but it sent a strong message about the importance of education. And in Charlene's estimation that message couldn't be overemphasized.

Following the graduation, the trustees came forward to collect the offering. A deaconess prayed for the gifts and the givers. Then the ushers directed traffic and Perfected Praise sang another up-tempo number to keep people moving briskly as they brought their gifts to the altar.

Nic and Kendall were grateful for a chance to stretch their legs during the offering. They used the time to take a bathroom break and to get a refreshing drink of water from the fountain in the vestibule. As instructed, each one managed to return before the speaker rose to deliver the sermon.

Pastor Carlton adjusted the mic for the first lady as she prepared to introduce the guest speaker. When he finished, she tapped the mic to make sure it was on then she addressed the congregation.

“It’s widely believed that when the good Lord wants something *said*, He calls on man. But when He wants something *done*, He calls on woman,” said Sister Jeffries, evoking a mix of laughter and applause from the congregation. “Who can deny that this dynamic preacher is anything but a woman called by God?” It was a rhetorical question. “I believe the Lord wants something *done*,” Sister Jeffries continued. “I believe He wants to start a spiritual revolution. That’s why He raised up this great woman of God. In these last, evil days, He has raised up a spiritual giant like my sister to preach the word, to be instant in season and out of season, to reprove, rebuke and exhort. For, surely the time has come when people no longer endure sound doctrine. But they appoint and anoint preachers and teachers who permit or pardon their immoral and amoral behavior. Surely, the time has come when people have dismissed Biblical facts in favor of popular fiction.”

That remark brought an Amen chorus from the congregation.

“But I thank God for women like my sister in the Spirit, Dr. Piper Ponquinette,” said Sister Jeffries of her former college roommate. “She is an educator by trade and an evangelist baptized by fire according to the grace of God.”

Applause and amens rang out indicating that the faithful readily agreed with the description of the guest speaker.

As the first lady read a synopsis of the pastor’s biography, it struck Charlene that despite women’s advances in other areas of society and despite the Church’s tendency to follow the way of the world in many instances, one area where the Church had been loath to change involved women in leadership. Women, Charlene maintained, were power players in nearly every other aspect of American society. They’re billion dollar consumers. They’re the primary breadwinners and heads of households in an ever-increasing number of families. They’re legal professionals and public safety officials. They’re doctors and dentists, pilots and astronauts. They’re school superintendents and college presidents. They’re money managers and media moguls. They sit on Boards of Directors and they’re CEOs of multinational conglomerates. Yet in the land of equality and opportunity, they’re still treated as second-class citizens in two key arenas—politics and religion. To Charlene’s way of thinking, it hardly seemed right that a country which prided itself on being a progressive world leader seemed quite content to trail peers like Germany and England in electing women to the highest political office in the land. And the situation seemed downright ludicrous in view of the fact that countries such as India, Israel and Pakistan had long since elected women to the posts of President or Prime Minister.

Though Charlene had no ambitions either way, neither to pastor a church nor engage in politics, it just didn’t sit well with her spirit. After all, in Genesis chapter one, God Himself gave Adam *and Eve* dominion in the Garden. And He appointed Deborah a judge over Israel. Those two examples should be more than enough to support His line of thinking on the matter. Never mind the fact that out of all the people He could have chosen to discover the empty tomb and spread the good news of Christ’s resurrection, He chose women. If the Triune God deemed

women fit to lead, to serve and to spread the good news, then who was mortal man to decide otherwise? *Hmmm...*as that thought crossed Charlene's mind, she realized that she needed to work on bringing into captivity every thought and making it obedient to Christ particularly during the rites and rituals that defined the modern worship service.

Bringing the introduction to a close, First Lady Jeffries said, "Dr. Piper Ponquinette is as beautiful as her name is unusual. So, I know the men will have no problem staying awake during today's sermon."

Like many others, Dr. Paul Ponquinette, Piper's husband, chuckled at the remark.

"In fact, I'm sure that's why a great many of you showed up early and will undoubtedly stay late today. You're captivated by this sister's outer beauty. But I promise you, that's just the icing on the cake. As Brother Paul can certainly attest, the heart and soul of this woman are beyond beautiful. Indeed, they put her in a class all by herself. And after Sister Meeks sings "I Won't Complain" which happens to be Pastor Piper's favorite song, the next voice that you will hear is that of my esteemed and accomplished sister in Christ, Dr. Piper Copeland Ponquinette, Co-Founder and Co-Pastor of Newfound Faith Christian Center of Houston, Texas.

The congregation applauded the complimentary remarks as Sister Jeffries hugged Pastor Piper then took her seat between Pastors Jeffries and Ponquinette.

During the exchange, Sister Meeks approached the microphone in the choir loft and belted out a stirring rendition of the gospel classic, "I Won't Complain", in the style of Rev. Paul Jones. The alto softly but powerfully sang, *"I've had some good days, I've had some hills to climb, I've had some weary days, and some sleepless nights... But when I look around and I think things over, all of my good days outweigh my bad days, so, I won't complain."*

When the song ended, the beloved of God gave Sister Meeks a standing ovation. And while an assistant arranged her Bible and notes on the podium, the guest speaker took care to acknowledge the soloist's remarkable gift and talent.

When the congregants had settled into their seats, the stunning bi-racial beauty adjusted the microphone and greeted the congregation. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," she started. "For truly, He is worthy to be praised. Amen?"

"Amen," the parishioners collectively agreed.

"I thank God for you, Eastern Star, for your great pastor and your dynamic first lady who are very dear friends of mine. In fact, First Lady and I refer to ourselves as 'best friends'. We've been running buddies since our school days," Pastor Piper said proudly. "We were sorority sisters," she explained. "We pledged together at Howard. I won't mention when. But suffice to say, *it was a while ago,*" she said comedically.

Sister Jeffries smiled and nodded as the others laughed.

"She was my back when we were on line and she's had my back ever since. So, I love her dearly." Turning towards the first lady, she said, "I love you, girl."

"Love you too," Sister Jeffries said softly.

"And before we get into the Word, I'd like to share something that some of you may not know about her."

Members of the congregation laughed as Sister Jeffries squirmed in her seat.



“I know she walks around here acting all prim and proper and perhaps even demure,” she said with an eye towards the first lady. “Let me assure you, she is anything *but!*”

Pastor Jeffries and Pastor Paul Ponquinette nodded knowingly and the congregation burst into laughter.

“Let me assure you,” Pastor Piper added, “girlfriend has some serious spunk. In fact, she is a firecracker!”

Ministers Jeffries and Ponquinette tried to give each other five, but from her seat between them the first lady disrupted the gesture. Their byplay elicited more laughter from the crowd.

Amused by their juvenile behavior, Pastor Piper smiled broadly as she continued sharing her story. “We went out to dinner last night with our husbands,” she said. “And, as it happened, our waiter was a guy that Sister Dorothy had dated when she was in high school.”

A veteran storyteller, Pastor Piper used her tone, facial expressions and gestures as appropriate for theatrical effect.

“Now, being from Texas, Brother Ponquinette and I didn’t know the man. And apparently neither did Brother Jeffries because she introduced him to all of us. So after the guy took our orders, he left the table and went about the business of placing our order and checking on other customers and what not. And after watching him for a little while, *your pastor got the big head,*” she said dramatically, shaking her head in dismay.

While Pastor Jeffries hung his head shamefully, the congregation and members of the dais enjoyed a hearty laugh at his expense.

“I tell you, his head was *so big* and his ego *so inflated* it’s a wonder he didn’t float away from the dinner table.”

Guilty as charged, Pastor Jeffries himself laughed at her account of the events of last evening.

“So, finally, he just got so full of himself that he turned to Dot and said, ‘*Baby, aren’t you glad you married me? I mean can you imagine what your life would have been like if you’d married that guy?*’ And my quick-witted, self-possessed sister looked him squarely in the eyes and said, ‘*John, if he’d married me, he would be the Senior Pastor of Eastern Star Missionary Baptist Church. He would be a tenured professor at the University of Chicago. He would sit on Boards of Directors for three multi-national corporations. He would be the Chaplain for the Cook County Sheriff’s Office. And he would own a beautiful brick home in Clarendon Hills. So the better question is, aren’t you glad you married me?!’*”

Gasps, laughs and applause echoed around the chamber as all eyes focused on the first couple. Pastor Jeffries fueled the fiery applause by bowing subserviently to his wife. As was her custom, Sister Jeffries smiled modestly and graciously dismissed the hullabaloo.

Pastor Piper cheered with the other onlookers as Pastor Jeffries kissed his bride and raised their clasped hands in a sign of solidarity and victory.

“Amen,” the guest speaker said as things simmered down. “That’s a beautiful thing, what God has joined together.”

“Amen,” Pastor Carlton agreed forthrightly.

“I thank God for you, my dear brother and sister,” Pastor Piper said. “I’m thankful for your leadership and for your example. And I thank you for inviting my husband, my pastor, my co-laborer in Christ, the honorable Dr. Paul Ponquinette, and me to be with you on this momentous occasion.”

The parishioners applauded, acknowledging Pastor Piper's distinguished husband.

"As Sister Dorothy stated in her very flattering introduction, I am an educator by trade. I was a teacher for many years. Now I'm an administrator with the Harris County School District back home in Houston," Pastor Piper explained. "And though I'm no longer in the classroom, I'm still passionate about my work. I'm passionate about educating people, particularly young people. So, I'm delighted to be here with you today for your commencement celebration." After taking a sip of water, Pastor Ponquinette continued. "I want to do something a little different today," she said. "I don't necessarily want to give you a traditional pep talk to get you pumped up for the journey on which many of you are about to embark. But rather, I want to bring you a word that will encourage you during the darkest days of your journey."

"All right now," a woman said from the Amen corner.

"Because they will come," Pastor Ponquinette said with certainty while arranging her notes on the podium. "No matter who you are or where you go there will be some difficult days ahead," she told the graduates.

"Preach, sister," said Deacon DeVoe, uncharacteristically attentive and alert. Like most of his cohorts, he hung on to Pastor Piper's every word.

"So, I want to bring you a word of faith today. And that word *faith* reminds me of a story about an elderly lady who was well-known for her faith and for her boldness in sharing her faith."

Pastor Piper walked a few feet from the podium in either direction as she recounted the story.

"Everyday, this little old lady would stand on her front porch and shout, 'PRAISE THE LORD!'" Pastor Piper said loudly. "Now, next door to her lived an atheist who would get so angry over her proclamations that in response he would shout, 'There ain't no Lord!' This exchange went on for years until the elderly lady fell on hard times. Then she changed her proclamation. When hard times visited her, the little old lady stood on her porch and shouted, 'PRAISE THE LORD! GOD, I NEED FOOD! I'M HUNGRY AND I'M HAVING HARD TIMES. PLEASE LORD, SEND ME SOME GROCERIES!'" the speaker cried. "The next morning, the lady went out to her porch and found a large bag of groceries. Overjoyed, she shouted, 'PRAISE THE LORD!' Just then, the neighbor jumped from behind a bush and said, 'Aha! I told you there was no Lord. God didn't buy those groceries, I did! Ecstatic, the lady immediately started jumping up and down and clapping her hands. She shouted, 'PRAISE THE LORD! NOT ONLY DID HE SEND ME GROCERIES, BUT HE MADE THE DEVIL PAY FOR 'EM! PRAISE THE LORD!'"

Laughter and applause ensued as the congregation appreciated the anecdote.

Pastor Piper smiled and took another sip of water. Then she turned serious as she prepared to deliver the sermon. "Faith is the essence of that little story. And that's what I want to talk to you about today, *faith*." Glancing at her wristwatch, Pastor Piper said, "I know the hour is well spent. So I won't tarry. We'll look at a few verses of scripture together, then I'll make a few quick points and get out of your way."

"Take your time, sister-pastor. Take your time."

"Amen," Deacon DeVoe concurred.



“As recorded in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Nehemiah, when Ezra opened the Book of the Law in the sight of all the people, they stood up. So, if you’re not already standing, I would ask that you stand up to honor the reading of God’s Word,” Pastor Piper said authoritatively.

With that, a few remaining stragglers scrambled to their feet and looked on with others who had Bibles handy.

“There’s a word from the Lord today and it comes from the book of Jeremiah,” the speaker started. “If you have your Bible, please turn to the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter and when you get there, I want you to focus on verse 11,” she said. “Jeremiah 29:11.”

Pages rustled furiously as believers sought to find the correct chapter and verse.

“I’ll be reading from the New International Version,” said Pastor Piper. “Read with me, please.”

In unison, the congregation read, “*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*”

After reading the text, Pastor Piper prayed.

“May the Lord add a blessing to the reading of His Word,” she said.

“Amen,” said the congregants, affirming the prayer.

“You may be seated in the presence of the Lord.”

As instructed, the parishioners took their seats.

“I want to talk to you today about having faith for the journey. *Faith for the Journey*,” she repeated the sermon’s title. “In our text, the Children of Israel had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon as a consequence of their sin and disobedience to God. They’d been taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar and it was God’s will that they stay in Babylon for a period of 70 years,” Pastor Piper explained. “And through the Prophet Jeremiah, the Lord was giving them instructions on how to live, how to survive, how to endure that 70-year period of exile. Through Jeremiah, He was trying to increase their faith and to give them strength to endure their circumstances.” Turning the page in her notebook, Pastor Piper continued. “Like the Prophet Jeremiah, I want to increase your faith and give you strength to endure your circumstances.”

“All right, now, pastor. Preach!”

“But I don’t want to encourage you for the sake of enduring captivity,” she said, taking the mic from its stand and walking to the side of the stage directly in front of the graduates. “I want to encourage you for the sake of accomplishing great things for God!”

“Say that! Say that again!” a sister shouted as she leapt from her seat.

“I want to give you strength for the journey, so that you can go the distance for God!”

“You’d better preach, girl!” Dr. Ponquinette said as he stood to his feet admiring the woman of God that was his wife.

“Like the Prophet Jeremiah, I stopped by to tell you what thus saith the Lord. And that word is, *yes*, there will be some difficult days ahead! But just like God promised to bring the Children of Israel out of captivity, and just like He planned to give them hope and a future and an expected end, that same God, my God, has a promise and a plan for each and every one of you!”

Graduates and non-graduates alike jumped to their feet, clapping, shouting and rejoicing over the good news.

“There is promise and potential in every one of you! *In my spirit*, I see God raising you up to do more than you ever thought possible. But how many of you know that with God *all* things are possible!”

“Preach, pastor!”

The minister continued, “Sometimes the only thing preventing God from releasing His mighty power and unleashing your great potential is a lack of faith!”

“My Lord,” said Sister Meeks.

“Let me go over here and repeat that for the benefit of those who didn’t hear me the first time,” Pastor Piper said as she marched across the stage. “I said, *sometimes* the *only* thing preventing God from releasing His mighty power and unleashing your great potential is a lack of faith!”

“Speak, my sister!”

“Before God can do anything *with* you or *through* you, He has to know that your faith is right. He has to know that you can go the distance with Him—that you have *faith for the journey*.”

“My Lord.”

“All right now, preach Pastor Piper.”

Returning to her normal tone of voice, the evangelist said, “I want to focus on the word *journey* for a minute.”

While some parishioners returned to their seats, others remained standing.

“Now, if you’ve ever been on a road trip with God,” Pastor Piper continued, “then you know that He runs the show. He’s the pilot and co-pilot. He’s the skipper and first mate. He’s the engineer and conductor. I mean, from start to finish, He runs the show. Amen?”

“Amen,” said a brother in the choir.

“And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. But if you’re curious like me, then you probably want to know things like...*where you’re going; how you’re going to get there; and, when you’re going to get there*. Those are the kinds of things that I like to know *before* I take a trip with anyone,” she admitted. “But when you take a road trip with God, it really is a test of your faith. Because He doesn’t always tell you where you’re going; how you’re going to get there; and, when you’re going to get there. He expects you to trust Him *implicitly*,” she said before taking a sip of water. “Now, I don’t know about you, Pastor Jeffries, but when I’m on a road trip with God, I revert back to my childhood. And I start asking questions like...*Are we there yet? How much longer ‘til we get there?*”

Like many of his members, Pastor Jeffries appreciated her candor and humorous delivery. “Preach, sister.”

“And like my parents, the Lord is content to ignore me from time to time,” she said jokily. “No matter how much I try to coax it out of Him, He’s content to let me sit back and enjoy the ride.” Flipping several pages in her notebook, Pastor Piper said, “I don’t know about you, Sister Jeffries, but I pose questions about time and distance when I go on a journey because I like to take the quickest and most direct route from point A to point B.” Slyly, she added, “My husband and I differ in that respect. He likes to try to find ‘shortcuts’ when we travel. But how many of you sisters know those ‘shortcuts’ usually wind up being the ‘scenic’ route?”

As expected, many of the women applauded or raised their hands signaling their agreement.

Pastor Paul Ponquinette and the other men casually ignored the barb.

“But when you go on a road trip with God or, better yet, when He sends you on a journey, the route that you take may not necessarily be the quickest and most direct route from point A to point B.”

“Come on wit’ it, preacher.”

“Having matured spiritually, I now understand why He does so. And to help me illustrate this point, I’ve brought along a few props,” she said. “Minister Boatright, I need your assistance.”

As directed, Pastor Piper’s armor-bearer joined her on the stage to assist with the demonstration.

Charlene didn’t quite know what to expect, but she knew it was going to be powerful. As Pastor Piper walked to the far end of the stage, Charlene noted that beneath her robe, she was wearing slacks and running shoes.

When Pastor Piper gave the cue, Sister Boatright and Brother Carlton unveiled an 8-foot-tall faux fir tree beautifully decorated with large globe-shaped ornaments.

“This tree represents the Tree of Life. And each ornament on this tree represents a different blessing,” Pastor Piper explained.

One by one she called out the blessings, thus working the crowd in to a frenzy.

“Redemption. Salvation. Purity. Restoration. Peace. Love. Joy. Good health. Wealth. Prosperity. Education. Opportunity. Economic success. Food. Shelter. Clothing. Safety. Sanity. Sobriety. Hope. Healing. Deliverance. A helping hand. Healthy children. Generational blessings. Communal blessings. Marital bliss. Family unity. Church unification. And this last one simply has a blank space on the label because whatever you need, God’s got it! You don’t hear me, church!” she shouted. “I said *whatever you need*, God’s got it! I’m here to tell you that God is enough! He is THE GREAT I AM because He’s *everything* you could ever need Him to be!”

A hallelujah chorus rang out over the last declaration. It brought choir members, clergy members and most of the congregation to their feet.

“Now to help me demonstrate why God doesn’t always let you take the direct route from point A to point B when He sends you on a journey, Minister Boatright and I made up these Olympic-style medals. And we have 30 of them because each one corresponds to a blessing on the Tree of Life.” She turned two of them towards the nearest video technician so that the images could be projected on to the screens at either side of the stage. “Let’s see, this one’s labeled ‘deliverance’ and this one is labeled ‘opportunity’. Did you get that?”

He nodded.

She handed the two medallions back to Sister Boatright who put them back in the box with the others. Then Pastor Piper descended the stairs and walked over to one of the graduates standing at the end of the second row. She took the sister by the hand and asked, “Baby, what’s your name?”

“Patrice Sanders,” she said timidly, wiping away tears as she spoke.

“You’re a graduate of what institution?”

“I just graduated from Grambling State University, ma’am.”

Pastor Piper gave her a hug and said, “Congratulations, Sister Sanders, I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you, pastor,” she said, her voice trembling.

“Now, Patrice, do you know why I came over to you?”

“No, ma’am,” she said, barely above a whisper.

“I came over to you because I sense that you are an awesome woman of God, but you don’t know it yet.”

Patrice’s knees nearly buckled at that pronouncement.

“In my spirit, I sense that you’ve been resisting God’s call on your life because of fear. Somehow, you don’t feel qualified to do the work of the Lord. But I’m here to tell you that God has not given you a spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. He’s already given you the power and the gifts that you need to accomplish His will for your life. But you need to learn how to tap into that power. And you need to learn how to operate in your gifts. Do you understand?”

Patrice nodded while dabbing at the corners of her eyes.

“All right,” Pastor Piper said, leading the young lady up the stairs to the center of the stage. “Patrice, I’m going to give you a chance to start operating in your gifts right now. OK?”

“OK.”

“Do you see the Tree of Life over there?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The Tree of Life is yours. Every blessing on that tree is yours.”

For the first time, Patrice smiled.

“Such a pretty smile,” Pastor Piper remarked.

“Thank you.”

“Now, Sister Patrice, do you want to go get your blessings?”

Her eyes sparkled as she said, “Yes!”

With that, the evangelist signaled for Sister Boatright to come forward with the box of medals. The assistant draped 10 medals around Patrice’s neck and 10 medals around each of her arms.

“All right, let’s go get your blessings,” said Pastor Piper as they walked in the direction *opposite* the Tree of Life and descended the stage.

By now, Charlene and most of the others weren’t quite sure where this skit was going. But they paid attention nonetheless.

“Like every other child of God, Patrice, you’ve been blessed to be a blessing to others,” Pastor Piper explained. “But, it’s incumbent upon you to start the cycle of blessings. Sister Patrice, in order to get to your blessings, you’ve got to distribute God’s blessings to others. You have to *give* in order to receive.”

Several members of the dais leapt to their feet as the point Pastor Piper was trying to convey registered with them.

“You’ve got to go lay hands on this one,” she demonstrated while Patrice draped a medal of blessing around the neck of a man in a wheelchair.

“And you’ve got to prophesy to that one,” Pastor Piper said, clasping the hand of an elderly lady as Patrice draped a medal around her neck.

Moving quickly through the aisles, Pastor Piper said, “You’ve got to lead this one out of bondage and lead that one to Christ.”

Though she looked to be forty-something, Pastor Piper zipped around the sanctuary like the Energizer bunny. Meanwhile, Patrice struggled to keep pace with the pastor because the medals were weighty and the ribbons prone to tangling. Still, she kept up with her to the extent that she could.

“You’ve got to pray healing for this one. And pray deliverance for that one,” said Pastor Piper as she worked her way through the crowd. “Come on, Patrice! You’ve got to witness to this one. And encourage that one.”

Patrice took several detours on her journey. In some cases, she snaked her way through the crowd. In other cases, she stepped over people in pews while trying to catch up with Pastor Piper.

“Come on, Patrice! Let’s go get your blessings!” the preacher shouted above the roar of the crowd.

“Give this one a Christian hug! And greet that one with a holy kiss, Patrice!” she exclaimed. “Tell this one that God loves her! And tell that one that God forgives him!” she preached, pausing to witness to a few people in her path.

The short break gave Patrice the opportunity to catch up with the dynamic speaker. When they were reunited, Patrice sighed, “Whew! I’m tired. This is hard work.”

Pastor Piper seized the moment. Into the mic, she cried, “Patrice, I know you’re tired! I know you’re weak! I know you’re worn! But I hear the Lord saying, “Lean on Me! I’ve got you, my child! In your weakness, My strength is made perfect!”

“Preach, Piper!” the first lady said with a wave of her kerchief.

“Patrice, lean on me!” she said, throwing her free arm around the sister. “Kick off your shoes, girl! Take off that cap and gown if you have to! Call on the name of Jesus! Say, help me Holy Ghost! Whatever you do, Patrice, *don’t quit!*”

“Hallelujah!”

“Amen!”

Once again, the determined young saint set out to distribute the remaining medals. As she went about draping medals of blessing on others, Pastor Piper walked behind her cheering her on.

“Hang on in there, girl! You’ve been sent to set captives free!” she exclaimed.

As she preached, scores of believers applauded Patrice’s efforts. Their actions helped to keep her motivated.

“Come on, church! Help keep Sister Patrice encouraged!” Pastor Piper cried, summoning their assistance. “Tell the sister, don’t get weary in well doing, Patrice! For in due season, you shall reap if you –”

“Faint not!” the well-taught congregation replied, finishing the scripture.

“Say to the sister, the race is not given to the swift nor to the strong, but to the one that endures –”

“To the end!”

Seeing that she appeared to be slowing down, Pastor Piper exclaimed, “Let’s go get your blessings, Patrice! Come on, anointed woman of God! You can do it!”

Again, she enlisted support from the church.

“Help this sister out, church! Tell Patrice that they that wait on the Lord shall –”

“Renew their strength!”

“They shall mount up with wings –”

“As eagles!”

“They shall run, and not be –”

“Weary!”

“And they shall walk, and –”

“Not faint!”



As they finished Isaiah 40:31, Patrice distributed the last of the 30 medals. Though she was exhausted and despite the fact that every muscle in her arms burned from the workout, Patrice hoisted her arms in the air victoriously spurring a round of applause from the congregation.

From a spot near the Tree of Life, Pastor Piper cried, “Now, Patrice, come on and get your blessings!”

As she made that announcement, Ministers Boatright and Carlton started opening the globes on the tree and pulling out medals of blessing. The tree was covered with well over 100 ornaments and each one held a medal. Consequently, Ministers Beard and Cherry went over to lend a helping hand.

“Come on, Sister Patrice, and get what God has for you!”

Wiping away tears, the young sister made her way through the crowd to the stage. As she approached the Tree of Life, the ministers embraced her and started showering her with medals of blessing. They draped them around her neck and put some on her arms until she couldn’t handle any more. Then she took off her robe and they started putting them in the pockets of her suit jacket and slacks.

Seeing the abundance, Pastor Piper said, “Patrice, baby, I believe you’ve been overtaken by your blessings.” Then she shouted for joy as she recalled a passage from Deuteronomy. She cried out, “And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all His commandments which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth! *And all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God!*”

Patrice and countless others started running and jumping and shouting for joy as they listened to the word of promise.

“Blessed shalt thou be in the city!” Pastor Piper cried. “And blessed shalt thou be in the field! Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle, the increase of thy kine (cattle), and the flocks of thy sheep! Blessed shall be thy basket and thy store! Patrice, blessed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and blessed shalt thou be when thou goest out! The Lord shall cause thine enemies that rise up against thee to be smitten before thy face: they shall come out against thee one way, and flee before thee seven ways! Patrice, the Lord shall command the blessing upon thee in thy storehouses, --and in all that thou settest thine hand unto; and He shall bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee!”

By the time Pastor Piper finished delivering the prophetic verses, every Spirit-filled saint was caught up in the Spirit. All the ministers were standing. Half of the youth choir members were stretched out in the choir stand and others were out shouting in the aisles. The mothers and ministers’ wives were crying. And the trustees and deacons were praising God. Some church members were swaying in their seats while others lay prostrate in the aisles. The ushers who could tend to them were covering the women with cloths or suit coats.

Surely, the presence of the Lord was in the house. And He was in no hurry to leave.

Still full of the Spirit, Pastor Piper called to the stage everybody who’d received a medal of blessing. When the last of the 30 recipients, the man in the wheelchair, was brought onto the stage, she said to Patrice, “Beloved child of God, as you went on your journey, I know you got tired and weary! I know you had to endure some pain! I know you shed some tears along the way! I know you had to overcome obstacles, baby girl, and you had to go against the grain! But you

endured all of that for a reason, Sister Patrice!" she said, rocking joyfully. "The work of the Lord is weighty at times! And we had to build up your strength and endurance so that you could go the distance for God!"

"Come on with it, sister! Preach!" said Pastor Jeffries.

"But for all that you endured, Sister Patrice! Look what God accomplished through you!" she said, indicating the 30 people gathered on stage. "One anointed woman of God blessed all of these people, church! And like the prophet Jeremiah, I stopped by to tell you what thus saith the Lord!" she huffed. "Patrice and Eastern Star, the Lord my God says, *I know* the plans I have for you! Plans to prosper you and not to harm you! Plans to give you hope and a future!" she exclaimed. "He's going to bring you to an expected end!" she declared. Bubbling over with the joy of the Lord, Pastor Piper explained, "That's why we couldn't take the direct route from point A to point B, church! If we had taken a shortcut! Or, if we had taken the direct route to your blessings, Patrice! You would have been the only recipient of a blessing! But because we took the scenic route! Because we went the long way, 30-some people got blessed!"

"Glory be to God!" Sister Jeffries shouted, raising her hands in praise.

"And because you hearkened diligently to the voice of the Lord!" Pastor Piper preached. "Because you obeyed all of His instructions!" she exclaimed. "Everything you gave up *for the gospel's sake!*" she said emphatically. "Every blessing that you gave away, Patrice, has been returned to you in *good measure! Pressed down! Shaken together! And running over!*"

"Hallelujah, Lord!" said Evangelist Stroy. "Oh, glory be to God!" she shouted.

Barely able to contain herself, Pastor Piper cried, "I'm almost through! Help me Holy Ghost! Help me finish this word!" she said excitedly. "Now Patrice, it was not by happenstance that we chose to use a fir tree for this demonstration!" she said, shaking her head. "We chose it because it's in the same family as the evergreen! And that's what you're going to be, Patrice! You're going to be *forever green!*" Trembling, Pastor Piper prayed, "*Have mercy, Jesus!*" Then she continued. "You're not going to receive a flash-in-the-pan type of blessing! Oh no, baby girl!" she declared confidently. "You're going to receive perpetual blessings! So not only will you be blessed, but you'll be able to replenish and refresh others from your reserves!"

Another hallelujah chorus erupted as saints shouted all over the sanctuary.

"Like the psalmist said, Patrice!" Pastor Piper cried. "Like a tree planted by the rivers of water! *Hey!!!*" she shouted, doubling over momentarily. "Like a tree planted by the rivers of water! *Oh, Glory be to God!*" she grimaced as she labored to finish the sermon. "Like a tree planted by the rivers of water! That bringeth forth its fruit in *due* season!" she exclaimed, shaking her head furiously. "Your leaves also shall not wither, Patrice! *Thank you, Jesus!*" she cried with tears forming at the corners of her eyes. "And whatsoever you do, Patrice! *Oh, hallelujah, Lord!* Whatsoever you do, Patrice! *Lord, you're worthy to be praised!*" she shouted. "Whatsoever you do, Patrice! *IT...SHALL...PROSPER!!!*"

As soon as she delivered the last line of the sermon, Pastor Piper flipped the mic to Minister Boatright and started worshipping and praising God. She shouted and danced all over the stage as did Patrice and many others. All over the church, saints erupted in various forms of praise and worship. The musicians were also swept up into the frenzy. They started playing a spirited tune and the praise party really kicked into high gear.

After about 10 minutes or so, the wave crested. Not long after, Pastor Carlton took a mic and walked down to the center aisle to give the invitation to discipleship. He invited people to come for salvation, to come for watch care, to come on their Christian experience, to come by letter of reference, and to come for restoration or reinstatement. Five people came forward to join the church. Three accepted salvation and two came by Christian experience. As each one approached the pastor, the congregation rejoiced like the angels in Heaven.

"Last call," Minister Carlton said, extending his free arm towards the masses. "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian," he said, making his final plea. "Reading the Bible doesn't make you a Christian," he said. "It may make you a Bible scholar, but it doesn't make you a Christian."

"Amen," said Sister Cherry.

"The only thing that gives you the right to be called a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, is accepting salvation and professing Christ as both your Savior and Lord," the youth minister explained.

"Amen, bro' pastor," said Deacon DeVoe.

As he let the invitation stand, Perfected Praise started singing, *Here and Now*, a song about the benefits of salvation. It was led by a gifted young CeCe Winans sound-a-like. The choir opened the song with an angelic musical progression which slowed dramatically then evolved into a call and response with the soloist.

*Here and now  
Here and now*

*You'll find peace  
to rest your weary soul  
You'll find love  
to heal and make you whole  
You'll find grace  
the sin-sick soul to save  
Protection  
He'll make your enemies behave*

*Here and now  
Give Him your life today  
Here and now  
The hour is getting late  
Here and now  
The Son gave His life for you  
Here and now  
His will's now yours to do*

*Here and now  
Here and now  
Right here  
Right here and now  
Here and now*

*You'll find strength  
to calm the raging seas  
You'll find joy  
Your sorrows He will ease  
You'll find deliverance  
Your sins He'll wash away  
You'll find victory  
over death and the grave*

*Here and now  
Let not one moment pass  
Here and now  
This may be your very last  
Here and now  
The Savior do proclaim  
Here and now  
Jesus, His Holy Name*

*Here and now  
Here and now*

*Right here  
Right now*

*There's no valley too low  
or a mountain so tall  
that--my Savior won't hear you  
and answer your call*

*At the door to your heart  
that is right where He stands  
Open it up  
invite King Jesus to come in*

*Here and now  
Here and now*

*Here and now  
Here and now*

*Right here  
Right here and now  
Here and now  
Here and now*

While listening to the song, several others were persuaded to join the church. At least 15 or 20 made their way to the altar. When the song ended, the musicians continued playing softly as Minister Carlton addressed the new members.

“We thank God for all of you who’ve accepted the invitation to yoke up with this body of believers. We want you to know that we’re not a perfect church. In fact, we’re far from it. But we serve a God who is perfect.”

“Amen.”

“Now, before we pray the prayer of salvation, I want to ask you a few questions,” he said. Using Romans 10:9-10 as a reference, he said, “Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? If you do, answer affirmatively.”

The deacons and ministers confirmed that each person responded affirmatively.

“Do you believe that He died for your sins?”

Again, each candidate replied, “Yes.”

“Do you believe that God raised Him from the dead?”

A collective “yes” was the reply.

“Do you believe He’s coming back to save your soul?”

“Yes,” the group replied.

“Then, my friends, welcome to your Father’s house,” Minister Carlton said with a smile. “Welcome to the house where Jesus is exalted and the Word of God is explained,” he said as he hugged each new member.

The congregation responded with an offering of praise.

“All right, new saints and *mature* saints,” he said, tipping his hat to the Bentons, the middle-aged couple that had joined the church on the basis of their Christian experience, “let’s pray the prayer of salvation.”

All over the church, members bowed their heads and prepared to recite the sinner’s prayer along with the new members.

*Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for saving my soul. Thank you, Lord, for loving me more than I love myself. Thank you, Lord, for loving me in spite of myself.*

*Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for the blood of Jesus which cleanses me of all unrighteousness. It cleanses me of sins past and sins present. And now, father, I ask that You forgive me of my sins both past and present. Right now, Lord, I leave them at the foot of the cross and I will remember them no more.*

*Now, Lord Jesus, please rest, rule and abide in me. Reign over me and be the Lord of my life for the rest of my life. Father God, please fill me with Your Spirit, so that I will sin no more. These blessings I ask in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

When the prayer of salvation was complete, Pastor Carlton offered the new members some words of wisdom. “Accepting salvation only takes a matter of minutes as you’ve just experienced,” he said. “But becoming like Christ is a *process* which takes a lifetime.”

“Amen,” shouted a brother from the balcony.

“The battle for your soul has been fought and won. Rest assured, that matter has been settled,” he said, making eye contact with each one of them. “So be sure of your salvation from this point forward,” he added. “Now the battle



becomes *internal* rather than external. It's a battle between your *flesh* and your *spirit* rather than a battle for your soul."

"Amen, pastor!"

"The matter of your salvation has been settled. But the measure of your Christ-like character is what may be called into question from time to time in response to your words or deeds."

"That's a good word, pastor!" said Minister Beard.

"Remember this," Carlton continued, "today is the first day of the rest of your life. So, if you make a mistake today, don't make the same mistake tomorrow. If you slip up today, don't slip up tomorrow. In essence, be better today than you were on yesterday. That's all God asks of us which is good because that's all any of us can do."

"Say that again, pastor!" Sister Colvin rang in.

When Carlton finished his remarks, the new members were instructed to follow the membership clerks to an office in the administration wing. There they would gather the new members' personal information and start the orientation process.

After welcoming the new members to the church, Pastor Carlton turned the service back over to the Senior Pastor.

"Give God a praise offering," Pastor Jeffries said, as he took the podium.

A light round of applause echoed throughout the sanctuary.

"Oh, you can do better than that, Eastern Star. I said, come on and give God a praise offering!" he demanded, eliciting a resounding round of adoration and applause for the Lord. "Praise Him like you really love Him!" he shouted. "Praise Him because He's an awesome wonder!" he added. "Praise Him because He's a strong tower and a very present help in times of trouble!" he shouted, eliciting an even more thunderous round of adoration for the Lord. "And praise Him for the awesome word which He delivered through this dynamic and anointed woman of God," he said, recognizing the speaker of the hour.

Pastor Piper smiled demurely. Rising from her seat, she gripped the cape resting on her shoulders with one hand and waved to the crowd with the other.

Pastor Jeffries continued, "Not only can she rightly divide the Word, but she can also bring the word like the great preachers of old. And that's saying something considering she's a young lady. Jokingly, he said, "She and my wife keep getting younger every year."

Pastor Piper and First Lady Jeffries laughed right along with everyone else.

"The last time I checked, I think they were claiming to be all of 23 or 24," he added lightheartedly. "Seriously though," he continued, "I thank God for choosing Pastor Piper Ponquinette and for using this vessel of honor to deliver a message which I know none of us will soon forget."

"Amen!" a good many members shouted. Eventually, their applause swelled to a standing ovation.

When they finished showing their appreciation for the visiting minister, Pastor Jeffries made a few other remarks to the guests and graduates then he said, "Pastor Piper, won't you come forward and dismiss us in the way you see fit?"

As requested, she approached the podium to deliver her closing remarks and the dismissal.

*“Faith for the Journey,”* she started, repeating the sermon title. “Graduates, God says, *‘I know the plans I have for you. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’* My brothers and sisters, I didn’t come to encourage you for the sake of enduring captivity. I came to encourage you for the sake of accomplishing *great* things for God.”

An Amen chorus erupted in the sanctuary momentarily. When it simmered down, she continued.

“If no one else gets this message, that’s all right. Sister Patrice, I came here for you and you alone,” she said. “I don’t know what the Lord has in store for you. But I know it’s awesome. That’s why I want you to digest this word and let it settle in your spirit. Will you do that for me?”

From her seat on the second row, Patrice nodded affirmatively.

“All right then, let’s go home,” she said. With arms raised, she directed the faithful to rise to their feet. “Everyone standing,” she said. “Since there are so many young people in the service today, we’ll dismiss on the pledge that we use for dismissal at our church on Youth Sundays,” she explained. “Repeat after me,” she said. “I am one.”

*“I am one.”*

*“I am only one.”*

*“I am only one.”*

*“I can not do everything.”*

*They repeated the statement as instructed.*

*“But I can do something.”*

*Again, they repeated the line.*

*“What I can do.”*

*“What I can do.”*

*“I ought to do.”*

*“I ought to do.”*

*“And what I ought to do.”*

*“What I ought to do.”*

*“By the Grace of God.”*

*“By the Grace of God.”*

*“I shall do.”*

*“I shall do.”*

*“Amen.”*

*“Amen.”*