

Benjamin listened closely as the pastor read from the Bible.

'May I ask a question?' Ben asked. Of course, go ahead, ask your question,' replied the pastor. 'Well, the Bible says that the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea,' then he continued to say that the children of Israel built the temple, then he said the children of Israel did this and the children of Israel did that. Didn't the grown-ups ever do anything?'

LETS PRAY

Greetings, Today is a day of tremendous thanksgiving. I give total praise to God for making this possible and this is a perfect example of "what only God can do". I want to say thank you to everyone here at First Church for all of the kindness that you've shown me. I'm scared to death of what's ahead because I never expected God to make me a be a pastor of any church. This level of ministry has never seemed attainable to me. This feels so strange and it's so awkward for me to think of myself as a pastor. This is beyond what I deserve.

Since last October, Jim and I have been praying together every morning at 6:00. When he was telling me that Scott was retiring and that you didn't have a candidate to replace him, without thinking, I instinctively said what about me. I really didn't expect him to ask the board if they would be willing to entertain using me as a speaker but, he did. As you all know, I'm not an ordained pastor and how God answers prayers, just continues to shock me. I have continually been able to see how God's ways are not our ways. God has been taking me down a path that I would have never believed possible and this August, will be 12 years since I finally gave up and surrendered my life over to God.

I've shared with some of you know that I've had 3 massive heart attacks and when I had the first 2, God placed me in a comma for 5 weeks. During the entire time, I experienced multiple near death experiences. Each time, an old black lady in her 90's would appear at the very last seconds of my life and save me. I experienced drowning, radiation burning, falling off of a baseball stadium wall, starvation and many other events. Every time, she would save me at the very last second.

When I came out of the comma, I had no idea were I was and all I knew was that I had to go to work. When I would first wake up, I'd try to pull out all the IV's, feeding tubes and everything else that was attached to my body. The hospital bed had alarms on it and multiple nurses would immediately come in and strap me down to the bed as soon as I would start moving. Eventually, they would come back and cautiously take them off. As the day went on, Trish and family members would come into my room. I thought I was in the Bahama's working at a hail storm but nothing made any sense to me. I had no clue where I was and seeing my families responses just made me feel like I was in a dream.

Prior to my heart attacks, I would describe myself as a rebellious person and even though I accepted Christ in 1986, I battled with God a lot. I think my heart attacks were God's way of giving me a major "time out".

My heart attacks and being in a comma is what made me finally say ok God, I give up and I'm all yours. It took 3 months for me to finally be able to go home from the hospital and I had to depend on everyone else for everything. I remember feeling like my entire life was starting over and it also felt like everything about my past was over. What God has done in the last 12 years has been so amazing and I wouldn't have ever believed it, if anyone was to tell me that I would be a Pastor today, I would have said "right". I'm so honored to have the opportunity to lead a church family and I'm so scared about knowing that God would entrust me with this task.

How all of this has come about is only able to be done by God.

After my heart attacks, for 2 years, God took me through some major training. First I had to walk away from old friends. I use to believe that I was the one who was going to save them but the truth was that they were the ones Satan used to hold me down. I wasn't strong enough to stay a healthy Christian. All I had to do was to stop calling them and none of them ever contacted me.

God started by teaching me things about prayer that I never knew were possible. The first thing God taught me was 1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18. **16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**

After going through what I had just went through (all the death experiences) I had no problem with surrendering my will over to Him and to pray without ceasing. This is when God taught me that "prayer is life". It's not just formal. Our prayer life is kind of like the difference of being an adopted child vs. a foster child. Foster children never totally bond with the adults they live with. Adopted children see them as a "mom and dad". The relationship is so different between the two. Living a prayerful life, felt like I was finally getting it. I was finally enjoying my Christian walk and I started to believe that I had value in God's eyes.

I was also reading the word quite a bit and when I read Mark 12:28-34. It jumped off the page

What's the Greatest Commandment 28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" 29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.[e] 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'[f] 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'[g] There is no commandment greater than these." 32 "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than

all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

This I could relate to !!!! I've always struggled when people have bible debates and when they argue about over the bible. It's never been one of my comfort zones. Serving my neighbor, “that, I could do”. Loving my neighbor was a no brainer because I've always been attracted to the underdog. I always struggled with academics and even as an adult, I struggled with feeling like I fit in with all the normal people. After 2 years of just learning about prayer and how to depend on God through prayer, a good friend of mine named Dave Oddo, invited me to a men's bible study/meal at the Maranatha church. It was a great time. It was real light hearted and the food was awesome. God put it on my heart to reach out to a couple of good friends at my home church and God was prodding me to start something similar at our church. Two of my friends, Al and Ron said they would like to start something but Al said he was “bible studied out”. If I wanted to “do” something, then he'd like to be a part of that. After about a month, God put it on my heart to start a service group called “The Doers Club” Al struggled with the name and a different friend came up with the name “His Helpers”. This was a perfect fit. We're God's (his) Helpers.

About 2 years later, I met Jim. We were working on a project in Wadsworth. Once I met Jim, we quickly became friends and God didn't stop there.

When Trish and I travel or ride the bike, I've always loved seeing old Churches and I've always daydreamed about buying one. When we would take our kids to Trish's family reunions, they had a real old church and it's just beautiful. All the old oak pews and all the wood in the church is just beautiful. The old churches have always attracted me and I love to daydream about how to develop a rural, small town congregation. Since I've never had any schooling and because of believing that I'm not “Holy Enough”, I could only dream about it. I never truly believed that I could be a pastor. In my career path, God has used me to build businesses and I've always wanted to use these skills for God. I enjoy the behind the scenes part. Well, God then used my oldest daughter for an inspiration. After her undergrad, she attended a 1-year mission trip in Lawndale Illinois called “mission year”. (Story of pizza shop) That gave me an idea for how to combine “His Helpers” with building a church. (explain vision) As I prayed and talked to God, In 2016, I stepped out by Faith and started a PDR shop in Tallmadge and named it BAC10Rides. BAC is an acronym for “Build A Church” the 10 represents what the business needed to do with some of their profits. The financial support would pay a pastor and continue the community outreach. The community could patronize the businesses and God would water it.

Since I do PDR, this is how I came up with the “rides” part of the name. I imagined BAC10Barber shop or BAC10Accounting and etc. That would be determined by who God brought to the church. It's why I'm so big on knowing and using our gifts. Once God helped me open the shop, I needed to start the church part. I talked with Trish and we used Ecclesiastes and gathered some other people to help with planning and that's when Saturday night Prayer & Praise group started. We called on people from different churches and we encouraged anyone to come. Jim was a part of this. Then God put it on my heart to start a Tuesday mornings men's group. Celebrate recovery was a huge part of my life and having accountability partners is how we live out **Proverbs 27:17 “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another”**.

Jim was a part of this too. Both of these programs were growing and when COVID hit, God changed the direction. Since Trish and I have some serious health risks, and because I was just renting the shop, instead of absorbing the costs, I closed the shop and we started using zoom as a way to continue the church side. During COVID, I looked for some old churches that were for sale but nothing ever caught my eye. I started to look for old barns on acreage and thought about building a retreat center. I pictured using the barn for the church building and I visualized many other uses for the property. God revealed to me that this could never work because physically I couldn't do the work and I could never afford it either.

This next part is what just blows me away. Last September, a Hail storm hit in Michigan. My role is acquire shops in the area that the Hail damaged. I had a big shop agree to us but it seemed like they were not being truthful with me. The owner shook my hand and agreed to use us. We were scheduled to start the following Monday but something was odd. On Monday morning, I was about 30 minutes early and since prayer is so huge for me, I felt a need to call a friend to pray with me. I called a couple of people and just got VM and then my friend Glen answered. He's my prison ministry friend and we prayed together. The shop did end up rejecting us but I was at total peace. Because of my experience with Glen, I wanted to continue to make “partner prayer” a part of my morning routine. This is when Jim and I started praying together during the week. What a great way to start your day. Like I said earlier, during one of those mornings, is when Jim was talking about the 1st church and he was talking about Scott's date of retiring. This is when God did what only God can do. He works in so many mysterious ways!!!!!! It just makes me lost for words. Everything about this is backwards and why any church would want me to lead their congregation can only be a God thing. You've all been so willing to support me and every one of you have made me feel so wanted. I'm going to be 62 years old this August, I'm the most unqualified person for being a pastor yet God has made this happen.

This entire process has been the hardest interview process of my life. I've had to face some things in my past that are very hurtful and even after that, you and the denomination are willing to say yes to me for being the pastor here at 1st church. “WOW” It's going to be very challenging for me. In September, I'll be starting the seminary process and schooling has always been hard for me. It just shocks me to see how God has brought me to where I am today. Building a church has always been a dream to me but I would have never thought God would let me lead an established church. I promise to work hard at supporting all of you. I will do everything in my power to lean on God for direction and for His protection. In our media small group, we've all made the commitment to help grow the church by staying focused on “who are we doing this for”. I will try to do everything I can to serve God's will for this church.

In closing today, I'd like to ask Rob, Jeff, Andy, Tom and my friend Jim to come up here and say a prayer for me. If anyone else would like to come forward and offer your prayers for me, I would gladly receive them also.