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# When God Speaks

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# When God Speaks

A PASTOR'S JOURNEY

*Ray Holmes is one of my spiritual heroes. Fifteen years into his "retirement," he and his wife, Shirley, are still very active in pastoral ministry. Ray shared these reflections on God's leading with me at his home in Wakefield, Michigan, on February 20.—Editor*

BY C. RAYMOND HOLMES

I was not raised in a Christian home. My mother died at the age of 43 when I was 18 years old. I was an introvert. I barely graduated from high school. I never learned to study. I wasn't interested in studies. I had too many personal problems.

The day after I graduated I went to work with my father as a bricklayer. I was making top money in those days, but I was an unhappy young man. I yearned for something inwardly—call it hope, direction or goals, I don't know. I really didn't understand it myself.

One day, an acquaintance invited me to come to the youth meetings at his church. I think I attended two of them. I remember feeling very uneasy and out of place—not really belonging. They were reading the Bible and singing Christian songs and praying, so I stopped going. Then I thought, *Why*

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## Suddenly, I heard a voice behind me. “Isn’t it wonderful to know that above those clouds the sun is shining?”

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*not check out the Sunday morning church service?* For the first time in my life, I seriously listened to a preacher. He was a good man, but no matter what Bible text he chose, the sermon [theme] was always the same: “Repent and believe in Jesus.”

I didn’t understand it at the time, but somehow the message did not satisfy. So I tried the Lutheran church where I had been baptized as an infant. The young pastor’s messages were deeper. He’d take a Bible text, expose the meaning and then apply it to life.

I had been attending for about a year when suddenly, I don’t even know how to explain it, I became awakened to the reality that I was a believer. When it actually happened, I can’t say. It was an accumulation of scriptural knowledge and opening myself to the reality of God—especially to the reality of His Son, Jesus. I simply woke up to the fact that I believed. I was a Christian. Miracles happen!

Then I began to have this intense inner sense of a call to ministry. Realizing that ministers need an education, I laughed. You know, the kind of roll on the ground laughter. I said, “God, You goofed. I mean, this is ridiculous. You’ve got to be kidding!” But He wouldn’t let me go.

I couldn’t sleep. My mind was just filled with this inner sense of a call, a tug, and it was driving me nuts. It became so nagging that I made an appointment to see my pastor. As I told my story to him, he started to smile. I stopped talking because I thought he was laughing at me. I had laughed.

To my surprise he said, “I’m not laughing at you. I’m smiling because just a few days ago I sent a letter to Suomi College asking them to send you a catalogue, because I’ve had the impression that you should consider the ministry.”

I was dumbfounded. I went home with questions swirling around in my head. When I opened my mailbox, there it was. I read the catalogue with curious interest. *Now what am I going to do?*

I had been a Christian just a little more than a year and hadn’t really learned how to pray, but I started to talk to God seriously about this whole thing. I drove up to Suomi College one weekend to check it out. Over the next few weeks I reached the point where I told God, “Okay, if this is what you want me to do, I’ll give it a shot.”

When I told my father, who was working for me at the time, that I was going to quit the contracting business, his response was anger. “You’re making the most stupid deci-

sion of your entire life. It’s bad enough that you became a Christian, ... but to be a pastor ... and to go to college besides, ... [and] quit your business when you’re making money...”

So I sold all of my equipment, enrolled at Suomi College and moved into the second story of a faculty house with six other guys. Things didn’t go so well. As I remember, I flunked just about every mid-semester exam. I told God, “See, You goofed. I don’t have a brain that can do this!”

I was very discouraged and depressed. Secretly, I made plans to pack up and leave. It was 1954, in the middle of a Michigan U.P. winter. I stood at the window in the empty chapel looking out over a very dark, lowering U.P. sky. I felt as dark as that sky. Suddenly, I heard a voice behind me. “Isn’t it wonderful to know that above those clouds the sun is shining?” I turned around to see the local pastor who had come to prepare for the chapel service. I didn’t even know the man personally. I hadn’t talked to him about my dilemma, so he knew nothing about it. But he must have. Or maybe his pastoral heart sensed that he was in the presence of a troubled person. I don’t know. But those words did something. They temporarily snapped me out of my attitude of gloom.

A few days later I was sitting in the library with my history textbook propped up against a big dictionary, trying to read—looking at the words but not seeing them—and thinking, *Go to your room, pack your bag and disappear.* A hand reached over my shoulder and propped a 3 x 5 card up next to my history textbook. Hand-printed in blue ink were these words, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:16). I turned to see my history professor walking out the door. *How did he know?* That’s two.

God was speaking to me through human lips and bringing me into His presence. Every time God speaks, something happens. And what happened to me was, I stayed. The thought of leaving just disappeared.

By the end of that first year, I was on the dean’s list. Suomi was only a two-year college, so to finish a B.A. degree I transferred to Northern Michigan University in Marquette. I graduated with distinction. From there I attended three more years at the Lutheran seminary in Chicago.

I was ordained in 1961 and moved to Bessemer, Michigan, to pastor the Sharon Lutheran Church, in 1964. It was wonderful. God blessed in so many ways. It was a joy to see the

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youth respond to God’s call and form a gospel team called the *New Life Singers*. We purchased a bus that they named “Joshua,” and for a couple of years traveled from church to church.

The church was growing in their spiritual experience. There were informal gatherings to study the Word of God. The Holy Spirit awakened within them a desire to share their experience in Christ and encourage one another in the faith. My ministry was fruitful and productive, and I was looking forward to a bright future with this wonderful congregation. I didn’t know that God had other plans.

My wife Shirley enjoyed tennis. Her partner was a devout Seventh-day Adventist Christian, and their friendship went beyond tennis. They soon began sharing their testimonies, praying and studying the Bible together. In the summer of 1968, my wife asked me if it would be all right if she attended camp meeting in Wisconsin with her friend. Assured by her love for the Lord and her strong grounding in the Reformation, I had no fears that she would fall for the “legalistic teachings” of Adventism.

When she returned, I realized that something significant had happened in her Christian faith. She began keeping the Seventh-day Sabbath and reading and learning all she could. Many of our friends joined me in trying to discourage her from pursuing these Adventist teachings without success.

The following summer she again attended the camp meeting with her friend; and upon her return, [she] informed me that she was planning to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Sunday before her baptism, I had the painful task of announcing her plans to the congregation.

That was a difficult time for me. The crisis involved my marriage and my ministry. The people were very unhappy that their pastor’s wife belonged to a different denomination—especially the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I came to the awful realization I would have to leave. I thought, *Are You showing me another face, God, that I haven’t seen before? Would You put me through all this experience I’ve had and just say, “That’s all. No more?” Do I have to find another job?*

This was not only a personal crisis, this was a spiritual crisis—a crisis of faith. I began to have some serious doubts, and I reached a point where I couldn’t stand it anymore.

I called my former seminary professor who was still teaching in Chicago. I knew him well, and he was a man I trusted. I asked if I could see him, and he invited me to come down.

I stayed in his home, and he devoted two days to me—listening intently as I shared the whole story. When there was nothing left for me to say, he finally responded, “Ray, you need to ask God what He’s trying to say to you.”

He didn’t respond to my need as a theologian; he responded as a spiritual friend and on the level where my need was acute. Again, God spoke to me. His words had an immediate effect on my attitude, my mood, my whole being.

My teacher, my friend, gave me permission and freedom to say, “Okay, God. Is this another one of Your footprints? Is there something here that is happening? Are You trying to get my attention? Is there a new direction I must take in my walk with You?”

I had planned to return home, but instead I drove the other direction to Andrews University. I drove [my] Volkswagen camper into the seminary parking lot where I camped for two days while I met the dean and each of the professors. On my way home, I realized it was decision time. *What was I going to do?*

The husband of my wife’s spiritual friend invited us over to their house and he said, “My wife and I have prayed about this, and we want you to know that if you are interested in going to the seminary at Andrews we will pay you \$500 a month.”

I went to the sanctuary of my church, my heart just heavy with the thought of leaving a precious congregation where the Lord had worked through my ministry, with people whom I loved and who loved me. I prostrated myself face-down on the floor in front of the altar where I had served communion to these people for seven years, and I just groaned inwardly. You know, Paul talks about groaning. You cannot put your prayer into words. You just have this intense need, and you just groan and reach out to Him with your inner spirit.

I don’t know how long I was there—an hour? An hour and a half? Two hours? I don’t remember. What I do remember is that God heard me. He lifted my burden, and when I walked out of that sanctuary I felt like I was a foot

off the ground with a totally unknown future in front of me, but completely free to investigate.

God also gave me a verse from the Bible. I did something that I do not recommend to people. In desperation I said, “God, You have to give me a promise.” I opened my Bible and put my finger down, and it fell on Jeremiah 29:11; “I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans for your welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (paraphrase).

I clung to that promise as I resigned from Sharon Lutheran, put our household goods in storage, packed my wife and our two little kids in the car and headed to Andrews University. My intent was to see what impressions I would have and to seek information. I found Christ everywhere. On April 24, 1971, I was baptized and became a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I went on to complete a Masters in theology and a Doctorate in ministry, and served as a seminary professor until I retired in 1994.

I learned a deep spiritual lesson from those events. I learned that I had Someone in charge of my life that I could trust. He doesn’t make hollow promises. It may be rough for me—a struggle. It may take a lot of self-discipline, but when you hold on to the promise it’s not a hollow promise; He fulfills it. If it’s really His will, if it is really His promise, you can depend on it. The verse was right; I can really do all things, but only through Christ who strengthens me. That made the difference.

I accept people for what they are. I try not to give them the impression that their past spiritual experience was somehow wrong or unreal or something they should not appreciate. I try to help them realize God has been there all along. Now He’s showing them something new—to think different, a new way of understanding Him, of understanding the faith.

When the Michigan Conference learned after our retirement that we were moving back to my wife’s hometown of Wakefield, they asked if I would be interested in pastoring the church in nearby Bessemer. We were more than happy to do so, and the first thing I thought was, *What does God want us to do here?* So I began thinking and praying about that.

The congregation of about 20 had just decided to build a sanctuary, so we set up four phases of ministry. The first was to complete the sanctuary. The second was to complete a fellowship hall and kitchen. The third was to start a daycare.

And the fourth was to establish a church school.

All four phases are completed. I don’t take the credit. That attitude and that mission-mindedness was already planted in the members of the church long before we ever got here.

When we voted to build the school, we didn’t have any children. But by the time the building was finished, we had children coming out of the woodwork. It’s almost like God



*Bluff View School is a K-8 one-room school. Ray Holmes says, “When we voted to build the school, we didn’t have any children. But by the time the building was finished, we had children coming out of the woodwork. It’s almost like God was confirming, ‘Okay, you’ve got a school for kids, here are the kids.’”*

was confirming, “Okay, you’ve got a school for kids, here are the kids.” What can you do but go along with His program?

I think that the process by which it developed has confirmed and affirmed for them that God is here, and He is involved, and that when we’re faithful, He blesses—not because we are faithful, but because it’s the way in which we work together. That’s how we participate with God in His mission in the world.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is driven by mission—and it’s a biblical mission. The whole umbrella that covers it is eschatological. We see our mission as not only helping people come to know Christ, but also helping people become like Christ—to help them prepare for His Second Coming. It is a total redemptive ministry.

I am so grateful, and I praise the Lord that He has allowed me to continue to function in ministry at this age. God continues to speak, and I will continue to follow His voice as long as I live.

C. Raymond Holmes retired from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in 1994 and has continued his pastoral ministry at Christ Community Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bessemer, Michigan, for the past 15 years. He is currently writing a book of his journey, scheduled for publication next year.

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