



Chapter 2

BREAKTHROUGH

I knew I wanted to be a writer since I was 13 years old. It was the first time I ever heard (or at least thought I heard) the voice of God speaking to me. He said one word, but it was enough to change my life forever. I was at a youth group service when the youth leader called forward anyone who wanted to hear from the Lord. I thought that sounded pretty cool, plus all my friends were going up, so I bounded up alongside them, wondering whether or not this little magic trick was going to work.

I got on my knees and began to pray. I didn't know quite what to ask God my first time out, and I honestly can't remember the exact words I used at that moment. Most likely it was some awkward utterance of, "God, if You have something to tell me, I'm all ears." I remember sitting there, listening to the music play in the background, while everyone

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around me continued to pray earnestly. I began to wonder if maybe I was doing it wrong. Maybe I had to pray a longer prayer than that to get the God of the universe to notice me. But then something happened that would begin my life of knowing that God is real, while at the same time wondering if I was just making it all up in my head.

I heard God say something.

It wasn't an audible voice, but more like an explosion of a word in my head. I couldn't think of anything else, I couldn't even notice the music anymore. All I could hear was one word, like a mantra, playing over and over and over again inside my brain, like a jackhammer with no off switch.

"Writer."

That's all I heard, constantly, for probably two minutes. I was shocked, and I wondered why so many people were still praying around me. I thought they should just shut up and listen for a second, because obviously God was in a talking mood at the moment. I turned to my older sister who was kneeling next to me, still in fervent prayer, and I nudged her.

"Danielle!"

She reluctantly opened her eyes and looked at her annoying brother.

"I think I just heard God speak to me. I think He told me I'm going to be a writer!"

Her eyes rolled. "Great, now shut up. I'm praying."

She swung her head back and continued on with her heavenly petition, but this time I didn't even care that she had been a jerk. I had just heard God speak, and that was about the coolest thing ever.

"GOD SPEAK"

I should probably stop for a moment and mention this whole "God spoke to me" business. I am always a bit leery whenever I hear those words, because I have had so many people say that "God gave me this song" or "God gave me this poem," only to then realize that either they are mistaken, or God is a lousy poet or songwriter.

I now understand that God may very well give us ideas, but often our talent (or lack of it) gets in the way of His musings. But while we cringe inwardly, God smiles and delights in the fact that His children took the time to listen to Him, and tried their best with what He gave them. I think we're often more interested in the end result than God is. He seems to care more about faith and obedience than how wonderful or talented we are.

When I talk about God "speaking" to me, it is with great trepidation and not a little doubt. After all, what I'm hearing are really my thoughts, but to me, they are magnified beyond normal thoughts. They dominate my mind, and at first I was very hesitant to chalk them up to God, but the more I acted on them, the more I began to differentiate between what really was just me thinking stuff and what the Almighty was whispering to me. Jesus mentions that His sheep know His voice, and the more I hear it, the more I know it. (See John 10:4.)

But there is certainly a leap of faith that must be made, especially early on, and more than a few times you're going to look like an idiot. Fortunately, my kids make themselves look like idiots all the time, and I never judge them for it. In fact, I love them even more. God does too.

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So that one word started me on a long and torturous journey toward a dream that would one day be fulfilled, just not quite as I had expected. All through high school I wrote countless short stories, then moved on to books (very bad ones, mind you) in my college years. I then went to graduate school to learn how to write movies (as well as to avoid the inevitable—I knew that eventually I was going to have to get a real job). I wrote and I wrote and I studied and I read every book about writing I could get my hands on. I was a sponge for storytelling. I loved the nuance of narrative and the power inherent in a well-told story. I loved character development and plot twists and dilemma and action.

THEN ONE DAY...

But then one day in December 2005, something happened to me that had never happened before. I ran out of ideas.

During that time, I would write the ideas that came to my mind in an “idea book,” because I was always bursting with new ideas for stories and books and screenplays and didn’t want to forget the ideas until the time came when I could use them. I had just finished my latest screenplay when I returned to my idea book to try and figure out what to work on next. By this time I had written five full-length books and about eight or nine screenplays, and I was just starting to get good—in my own humble opinion. But as I looked through my old ideas, I became disheartened, then upset, and finally downright nervous. I had no more good ideas left.

So I tried to come up with some new ones. Nothing. Idea block.

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One evening I brought up the issue with my wife, Jenell. Without missing a beat, she asked me a simple question. “Why don’t you ask God for an idea?”

It was probably the dumbest piece of advice I had ever received. Ask God for an idea? Why would I do that? He created me with a creative spirit; it was my job to come up with the ideas, execute them, and then give Him all the glory. That’s how the game works. The only people who ask God for ideas are people who aren’t creative enough to come up with one on their own. And even then, it never works. No, God wasn’t interested in giving ideas to people. That was our job to do for Him. The idea of doing this actually made me angry.

Fortunately, I was in a desperate situation. I’m something of a producing junkie; so if I don’t have something to work on, I get irritable fast. So that night, as I lay down to go to sleep, I prayed the most non-religious prayer in all of history.

“God, if you’ve got an idea, I guess I’ll take it.”

With that I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

Five minutes later I was downstairs at my kitchen table frantically trying to write out the idea that was exploding in my brain. It was born out of all this crazy stuff my parents and wife had been telling me about when they came back from these strange conferences in Toronto, Canada.

My aunt and uncle had recently received gold teeth in a church service (don’t worry, I’ll deal with that in the next chapter), and my whole world of intellectualized faith was beginning to be challenged. Originally, as it came that night, it was going to be a television show about crazy stuff people believe in all different religions. But over the next few weeks

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and months, the idea began to morph into a short film about the crazy stuff *Christians* believe.

The only problem with this idea was that it had all the earmarks of something that was decidedly not in my creative wheelhouse. It was a documentary. I like fiction. It was Christian in theme. I like making stuff for the “real world.” It was a film. I like writing films, not shooting them; in truth, I had never before even picked up a camera. It required money. I had none. It required contacts. I had none. It was about crazy stuff. I liked normal stuff.

So I did the only thing that seemed reasonable. I ignored the idea entirely. I walked away from it because I didn’t want to do it. Deep down I knew I *should* do it and that I *would* do it someday; after all, it was an idea that, well, I *think* God gave me. But it just didn’t seem right for me. Not right then anyway. It was a back burner idea. Something I could do once I was a little more established.

Little did I know that in four months, I would have the most insane encounter of my life, and this future idea would become a *now* idea.

THAT CRAZY CHURCH IN TORONTO

I wound up in Toronto because of my wife. She came to me one day and said she would stop asking me to go to conferences with her if I just came to this one that was coming up in May. It was some prophetic thing, and it was at that crazy church in Toronto, so I had absolutely no interest in it whatsoever. Plus, I hate conferences. It’s like church for eight hours straight. Who wants to do that? But the thought of never being asked or dragged to one of them again compelled

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me to go just this once. And maybe I'd hear some crazy stories for that movie I was never going to make.

It should be noted here, in case you may not know, that the church I was going to visit is one that has had its share of controversy. Revival broke out there in 1994 and pretty much continues to this day in some form; it was a revival that ticked off a lot of people. The main problems, as I understood, were the manifestations that came upon people when they were "touched" by God. It didn't happen to everyone, by a long shot, but it certainly happened to a lot of them. While most people just laughed their heads off from the joy they were feeling, others did strange things: shouting, moaning, shaking, and generally making noise. This was a big no-no for religious types, obviously, and it led to a lot of people being upset about what was happening at this crazy church. Many people got "drunk" in the spirit and were so inebriated that they couldn't even drive home. I won't lie to you, it was a weird place for someone like me.

And it was this weird place that I was now trekking to with my family. In a normal universe, I wouldn't have been caught dead in a church like this. Like I said, I liked things simple, stable, and above all, normal. I had heard enough people railing against this "movement" to be wary of it, but there was one undeniable fact that I didn't quite know how to deal with. My family was being radically transformed at this place, and it was a transformation that only God could (or would) do.

My aunt and uncle had received gold teeth, which was the event that began the eventual healing of a horribly broken marriage. My parents and sister and wife were all going and coming back absolutely on fire for the things of God. My

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dad had a 40-year addiction to pornography obliterated in the twinkling of an eye. Something was changing in all of them, and all of the changes were for the better.

When I turned my critical eye to this church and did my research, I found people like Hank Hanegraaff saying that the devil was behind all this stuff. But then I looked at my family and friends, all of whom were being touched in radical, deep, and very profound ways, and were moving into a deeper, more loving relationship with Jesus Christ, and I had to respectfully disagree with the Bible Answer Man. If the devil was behind this stuff, I don't think a deeper relationship with the living God would be the outcome. I don't think pornography addiction would be annihilated. I don't think marriages would be restored.

I didn't know much of the Bible by heart, but I did know that Jesus once said that a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, just as a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. My family was experiencing very good fruit, so the devil couldn't be behind all of it. That simply wasn't logical.

So it was with a small dose of curiosity and a heavy dose of skepticism that I went to a conference with the "crazy Christians," as I viewed them. And it was exactly as I expected it to be.

I spent most of my time over the next three days being ticked off at what was happening around me. No one would shut up! I wanted to hear the preachers preach, but the people sitting around me kept laughing or making noises. I couldn't concentrate. Then they'd start shaking, twitching, or flailing their arms all over the place, and I knew I had officially entered the nuthouse. I don't care what kind of fruit was coming from this place, these people were insane. And to top it all off, my wife and sister were twitching like maniacs as well! I, of course, couldn't even get a static shock from the carpet. How could

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God be behind this craziness? I was certain most of what these people were doing was to either get attention or make themselves look more “spiritual” than the rest of the crazies.

At the end of each night, they would offer ministry to whoever wanted it. At least there was some order to this. We would all line up as members of the prayer team for the church would move among us and pray for us. This being a “prophetic conference,” the prayers were of the prophetic persuasion. Needless to say, I was intrigued to see what these people were going to pray over me.

The first shocking thing was that everyone who prayed for me seemed to be 20 years old or younger. The second shocking thing was that they were all really good at praying for me. Every single one of them, without fail, over three nights, had the same thing to say to me. Every prayer was some iteration of, “There’s something on a shelf gathering dust, and God wants you to take it down and do what you’re supposed to do,” or, “You’re avoiding the race, but God wants to give you the baton and He wants you to run with it.” It was bizarre. And the best part was, all of them ended their prayers with, “And you know what I’m talking about.” I certainly did.

This was helpful in nudging me forward a little bit on this short film God had given me an idea for, but it could still all be coincidence. And these people were all crazy, right? Obviously, I had to take that into consideration.

ANGEL BREAKTHROUGH

But then I met Breakthrough.

It was the last night of the conference, and everyone was being particularly Charismatic during worship that night.

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I figured the best thing to do was just close my eyes so I wouldn't have to watch it, and since I was in church, I figured I'd try to get something out of the worship. So I stood in the back with my eyes closed, when all of a sudden the worship stopped. One of the speakers, a little, older guy named Bob Jones (who had come through his own share of controversy in the past), had come onstage and grabbed the microphone.

He proceeded to tell all of us that an angel had just entered the building. His name was Breakthrough, and he had been in Nigeria for the past ten years. He had just come over here with a bunch of his angel buddies (I'm not making this up), and they were going to be traveling across North America for the next year looking for hearts that were turned to the things of God. Then he told us all to just keep praising the Lord and let them do whatever it is they want to do. Bob Jones then walked off stage.

This was almost too much to bear. Who did this guy think he was? How did he know an angel had come in? How did he know his name? How did he know where he was from? What he was doing here? And everyone was going crazy because they actually believed him. Did anyone have even a shred of critical thought left in this place? Total insanity. The whole lot.

Worship started back up, and I closed my eyes again. Let's just say I wasn't in the most "receptive" of states at that moment. I was perhaps the most critical person in the entire building, actually.

It was during this state of pious judgment that someone walked in front of me. I could see the light change a bit with my eyes closed, and I instinctively opened my eyes. No one was there. That was weird. So I closed them again, and there, just to my left, was an outline of...someone. I could make

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out his faint shadow, and he just stood there, about 5 feet away from me, looking in the opposite direction. But he stood stock still, and I stared at him with my eyes closed. I opened them again. Nothing. Closed them. There he was.

Suddenly he turned to me and walked right up to me. Again, all I could see was his outline, like a hazy shadow, but now I could *feel* him. Standing in front of me was easily the most intense individual I had ever encountered. His fists were clenched and he was on fire with intensity—he crackled with it. I half expected him to break through a wall at any moment. Then it hit me, that the guy who was just onstage actually knew what he was talking about. To this skeptical, discerning, practical college professor, there was no longer any doubt about it. Breakthrough was standing right in front of me.

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything. I stood there in awed silence. I kept opening my eyes, saw nothing, then closed them again. He was still there. Every time. Then he spoke to me. It wasn't audible, but was that familiar explosion of words in my head, where everything else is drowned out but the phrase.

“Are...you...ready?”

I had no idea what he was talking about. But I was raised in the church, so I knew enough that if an angel ever asks you a question, you just say yes. I nodded my head.

“Are...you...ready?”

“Yes.” Still no idea what it is I'm ready for.

Then I saw his hands reach up, and although I couldn't feel anything, I knew he was grabbing my head. He then screamed in my face, and it was as if every pore in my body cried out along with him.

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“ARE YOU READY!”

“Yes,” I replied, “But ready for what?” I spoke this out loud.

He stared at me for a moment. A scared young man and a super intense angel. Then he said the words that would forever change my life.

“Make that movie.”

And Breakthrough drifted away.

I had never experienced anything like this before, and I realized it was ending, so in my mind I thought, “Wait!” and instantly he was back in front of me. But something had obviously changed. Breakthrough wasn’t intense anymore. Instead, he was the most tender, loving individual I had ever met. He oozed tenderness. I could see his hand reaching out to mine, and then I heard a soft whisper in my head that was almost clearer than the shouting had been.

“What do you want, what do you need? I’ll stay with you all night if you need me to.”

It was at that moment that I realized I had called him back for no good reason other than I didn’t want the experience to end, and now I felt like an idiot. So I mumbled something about how I just thought this was really cool, and Breakthrough just stood there, waiting. It was then that I realized that he was probably waiting for me to release him, so I told him OK, he could go now. He then drifted out of my view and to the left.

WHAT HAPPENED?

I didn’t know what to do with myself. I remember opening my eyes and turning to my wife and my father, and

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they immediately realized that something had happened to me. Apparently, I was white as a ghost and a little bit shell-shocked. I told them that I had to go be by myself for a little bit because something crazy just happened to me, and I slipped away upstairs to the balcony area.

There was no one up there—everyone was still downstairs worshipping with great abandon—and I went to the farthest corner and sat down on the floor with my back to the wall. My head was swimming. What had just happened? I knew what had happened was completely, 100 percent real, but I couldn't wrap my mind around it. This kind of thing happens to other people—the crazy people at this conference—not to me. Not to a college professor. Not to someone who has never felt anything in church other than slight annoyance at those around him.

I remember praying the simplest prayer then. It was the prayer of a boy masquerading in a man's body. I simply asked, "God, what are You doing to me?" All pretense had vanished within me, and I only wanted to know what was going on. Immediately a picture erupted in my mind, and I heard a voice that was so real it could have been audible. I saw a young boy and his father in a field playing catch with a baseball. No one knew that this was my favorite memory as a child, playing catch with my dad in the backyard. It was the memory of safety and innocence and the height of my extreme trust that my dad was the greatest person in the world. The voice asked me a very simple question, but as soon as I heard it I burst into tears.

"Do you want to play catch?"

It was as if every ounce of pride I had left was being squeezed out of me by the weight of God's love for me at

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that moment. I no longer cared if anyone saw me crying, or knew that I had just talked with an angel, or even knew that I was still a boy inside longing to go back to the way things used to be; to a place where playing catch with my dad was the pinnacle of existence because it meant I could just hang out with him.

My whole life I had wanted that kind of relationship with God, but He was always too distant, too invisible, too spiritual, and too stuck in my head to make that desire any kind of reality. But here He was, forcing a picture into my mind of what He really thought of me. I was His kid. He was my Dad. And He wanted to hang out with me.

So we played catch for a while, I don't know how long. But I cried like a baby the whole time, and for the first time I understood what His love for me actually felt like. It was no longer in my head, it was no longer "head love"; it had reached down to my very soul. I was His entirely. Lead on, Master.

After a while I heard Him speak again. This time, there was a gentle purpose, but again, the words filled my head in a way that could only be Him.

"Get up."

I stood up, wiping tears from my face.

"Go to the edge of the balcony."

I walked forward.

"Now look."

I looked down. Below me were nearly 2,000 people who looked like they were completely out of their minds. They were *charismaniacs* in the best and worst way. They twitched, laughed, shouted, and danced around like 4-year-old children.

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I looked at that crowd of people, who I had been judging mercilessly just 30 minutes earlier, with new eyes. All I saw was hurt, heartache, pain, fear, doubt, and....

I looked away. This is what the Father saw all the time. He saw past the pretense, past the charades, past the posturing, and into the very heart. Immediately His voice rattled through my brain once again.

“Will you make it for them? Will you make it for My people?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I’ll do whatever you want me to do.”

In truth, I had no idea what He wanted me to do. Sure I knew I couldn’t run from this movie anymore, but I didn’t know what He had in store for me with it either. I thought I was going to make a short film about weird stuff. Little did I know that He had much bigger plans for it—and me—than I could have ever dreamed.