

## Chapter One

### Ground Zero

“As for you, tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you the former dominion will come. The kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.”

—*Micah 4:6-8*



It was in, of all places, a Greek restaurant during one of those light-hearted late summer Manhattan evenings, in the calming company of my future wife that my future course was set. And, as young men are often prone to do, after having fallen under the intoxicating sway of retsina and romance, I decided then and there to set my course according to the woman I loved; my very own “daughter of Jerusalem.”

As we sat at a cozy two-top at **Molyvos**, a favorite mid-town *estiatorio*, I marveled as Sandra deftly de-boned the grilled fish on her plate with surgical precision. Although I had not yet officially proposed, I had it made it clear to friends and family that I wanted this dynamic Colombian beauty to be my wife. From the

glint in her luxurious Latina eyes, I suspected that this was going to be a serious conversation. I was proven correct as Sandra, every bit as methodically as she had dealt with the fish, now directed her sharp focus on me.

“Bill, you know how I feel about you,” she began. She was right. I did. But I now felt that a “but” was on its way. I was right.

“But,” she continued, “if we are going to be together, these are the three things I need to let you know up front”

“Only three?” I thought, but I said nothing as I strained every muscle in my face and neck in order to avoid revealing my sense of apprehension. I was mentally weighing whether I should run away right now, or wait a little while before making my getaway.

“Okay,” is what I finally got out, wearing a pasted-on smile. “And what might those be?”

“Number one, no intimacy until we are married.” I nodded in agreement. This one was no problem. Sandra’s devotion to traditional values was one of the many things I loved about her.

“Number two.” She paused for effect, and then: “I want you to go to church with me every Sunday.” Now I paused and blinked a few more times than usual. My mother was a devout Christian, but as for me. I was strictly CEO — Christmas & Easter Only. Was I willing to give up my Sunday mornings to please the woman I loved? I amazed myself with how quickly I responded: “Of course. I’ll be there. For sure.”

The third item on her list threw me for a loop.

“And number three,” Sandra said, finally putting down her knife next to the skeletal remains of her *solomos*. “I’d love to go to Israel with you someday.”

“Israel?” I thought. Surprising, yet intriguing since I recalled how my mother was healed emotionally after her trip to Israel back in 1980. “Sure. Why not?” I said after a beat. I understood how important her religious heritage was to Sandra and I totally got why she would wish to visit the land where Jesus walked and preached. I thought this point was sweet and had no trouble

whatsoever agreeing to it — not for a moment imagining the important role that Israel would soon play in my life.

Fast forward a few weeks as I awoke to a cloudless blue-sky September Morn. My midtown Manhattan apartment at 53rd and 7th Avenue was only a few blocks from my office and I had beaten my alarm clock buzzer this morning. So, I had a bit of time to lie in bed and think back on all that had transpired since our dinner at the *estiatorio*.

I thought back to our first church experience together at the Upper Room Church in Dix Hills, New York. It was there that I witnessed the congregation, under the spiritual leadership of Pastor Donofrio, engaging in a type of charismatic Christianity I had heard about, but never before witnessed. Grown women, wrapped in blankets, who had been “slain in the spirit,” were falling to the floor as gospel music played and as enthused congregants laid their healing hands on the ladies while reciting prayers in a strange Pentecostal Holy Spirit language called “Tongues.” “How could grown people be behaving this way?” I thought. Dancing in the aisles, waving their hands wildly in the air, and demonstrating their devotion and love for Jesus Christ by babbling incoherently. My astonishment was accompanied by a sense of curiosity that prompted me to conduct some basic research. What I found out was fascinating. Permit me to share some of it with you.

The Upper Room Church was part of an American Christian movement known alternately as Evangelical, Charismatic, or Pentecostal. The church’s name, the Upper Room, refers to the house in Jerusalem that was the site of the Last Supper. It was also the place where Christ’s disciples had gathered seven weeks after the crucifixion. It was here, in this upper room, or Cenacle, that they encountered the Holy Ghost. Forty-nine days earlier, the disciples had joined Jesus in making pilgrimage to the Temple in order to commemorate Passover, which marks the liberation of the Children of Israel from the House of Bondage in

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Egypt. As retold in the Old Testament's Book of Exodus, the Hebrew children traveled through the desert for seven weeks until they reached Mount Sinai, where they experienced divine revelation and received the Holy Torah from God through Moses. This defining event is celebrated in Jewish tradition by the holiday of *Shavuot* (the sevens) and Judeans were required to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem, just as they had done for Passover, on this day each year.

As the disciples gathered in the Upper Room at the end of the 49th day, they discussed how they should proceed in fulfilling Christ's mission on earth. Some questioned his resurrection. It was on the fiftieth day, the Pentecost, that the Holy Ghost appeared to them and demonstrated God's power by causing the disciples to begin speaking in tongues, thereby making it impossible for them to continue spreading doubt about Christ's divinity. The scene was reminiscent of the Tower of Babel story recounted in the Book of Genesis.

As I lay there, I began to wonder if I would ever genuinely encounter this same feeling that I had witnessed at the Upper Room Church. A feeling that would direct me to turn my life over to Jesus Christ. As it turned out, God was lining things up in such a way that I would soon have my answer. But, at this point, I had no inkling, lying there, that what was about to happen was so spiritually powerful that it would soon drive me down to my knees and lift my spirit up towards the heavens. No one could have predicted what was about to happen. No one, with the possible exception of one person. Pastor David Wilkerson.

In addition to the Upper Room Church, I had also accompanied Sandra to the Times Square Church in mid-town Manhattan where Pastor Wilkerson held forth. His incessant words of warning were so dire and so disastrous that I was unwilling to receive them or believe them. I was blinded to the truth of his message by my own distaste for his apocalyptic message.

Pastor Wilkerson was a prolific writer who had penned countless books including a best-seller, "The Cross and the

Switchblade.” His book had been adapted into a major motion picture back in 1970 starring Pat Boone and Erik Estrada. Wilkerson had insinuated his church into the very heart of Times Square which, in those days, was overrun with porno movie houses, drug addicts, prostitutes and the city’s destitute and homeless. It was to this element of society that Pastor Wilkerson sought to spread his message of salvation through Christ.

I had listened to Pastor Wilkerson explain how God had placed a message into his heart which he was able to interpret in order to understand its prophetic meaning. He claimed to be able to see into the future and to discern coming events. What he foresaw did not sit well with me at all. I was at the height of my Wall Street career, positioned in the middle of what turned out to be the turn of the century Dot.com bubble. I was an up and coming Wall Street broker and not open to messages of doom and gloom that conflicted with the rosy retirement scenarios I was painting for my investor clients.

Specifically, Pastor Wilkerson was predicting that at the height of a euphoric and bullish time of prosperity, fires would consume Wall Street and parts of lower Manhattan. Many people in the financial industry, he foresaw, would fall or jump out of buildings in terror.

I found Paster Wilkerson’s predictions so disturbing that I was driven to tell Sandra that I no longer wished to attend his services. His was not the type of uplifting and inspiring message I had come to expect from a clergyman. Sandra and I argued about this, but I had made a commitment and continued to attend, despite my misgivings. While I was internally furious over Pastor Wilkerson’s prediction of doom for New York City, I found that I couldn’t help myself. I retained a morbid curiosity, much like someone rubbernecking at the scene of a highway accident. I simply wasn’t bold enough in my own spiritual development to contradict or confront this cataclysmic clergyman.

A few days before, Sandra had given me one of Wilkerson’s books as a gift. Written in 1998, *God’s Plan to Protect His Peo-*

*ple in the Coming Depression* (David Wilkerson Publications. ISBN 978-0883686164.) recounts the Pastor's vision regarding the future of the US economy. He depicts it as marked by "worldwide recession caused by economic confusion and a persecution madness against truly Spirit-filled Christians who love Jesus Christ."

I could not understand why my beautiful girlfriend was trying to depress me with this type of stuff by getting me to read a book about a coming economic depression. It all seemed so weird to me, but yet I did not turn and run. My love for Sandra was powerful and served to keep me by her side. I regarded her in the same way as Micah, in his messianic message, spoke of the "daughter of Jerusalem;" a place he identifies as "the tower of the flock."

As these thoughts of Torah, of towers, and of terror raced through my mind, I realized it was time to get up and face the day. A day that would turn out to be like no other before or since. A day, that before it ended, would see me wishing to God that I had listened and obeyed Pastor Wilkerson. What happened next, on that cloudless crisp fall day, was the unthinkable. His apocalyptic vision came to pass before my eyes!

I flipped on the little TV in the bathroom to catch the overnight market reports and immediately saw the news accounts of smoke coming from North Tower of the World Trade Center. Unbeknownst to all, Mohammed Atta and a group of radical Islamic terrorist hijackers aboard American Airlines flight 11 had intentionally crashed the plane into floors 93-99 of the North Tower, killing everybody on board, and hundreds inside the building including several good friends and colleagues of mine. At this early point in the disaster, news accounts were slow to speculate, and reporters were putting out a less alarming narrative suggesting that a small commuter plane might have been off course and crashed in to the tower by accident.

I decided to get to work quickly to inquire if others had more information about what was going on. As I hit the street on foot to my office on Sixth Avenue and 54th Street, I could hear in the

distance sirens coming from every conceivable direction creating a cacophony of shrill noise. Things were beginning to turn precariously close to Pastor Wilkerson's ominous vision. I had never heard so many sirens wailing at once in New York City, and never felt such a sickening sinking feeling in my gut.

I arrived to my building as the blare of emergency vehicles racing to the North World Trade Center Tower grew more incessant with each second. I got up to my office and nobody was working; everyone was either looking out their window to the downtown Tower on fire or watching simultaneous TV broadcasts of the minute-by-minute events of this epic tragedy unfolding before their eyes. A tragedy beyond words that had now set into motion events that would collide with and forever change our nation's direction irrevocably.

Then the second United Airlines plane, Flight 175, hit at 9:03 A.M. into floors 75-85 of the South Tower. The exploding fireball we saw before our eyes was so shocking and shattering that it filled the moment with complete silence — except for muffled gasps and plaintive shrieks of disbelief and horror. Without even thinking or knowing what I was saying, I mumbled: “Dear God. This looks like Jihad on America.”

People looked at me wild-eyed as if to say: “What the hell are you saying?” I felt nauseous and my head went a bit dizzy watching the conflagration roar in a massive cloud of black smoke and orange flame billowing from the two “Towering Twinfernos.” The scene before my eyes was the manifestation of the very apocalyptic image of death and darkness about which Pastor Wilkerson had preached.

My mind raced as I recalled with horror the many friends and colleagues who worked at one of the WTC towers. These included my close college buddy and fraternity brother, Cesar Augusto Murillo, who tragically perished that day (*see Chapter Four*).

In that moment, I dropped to my knees and started to recite the Lord's Prayer. With my knees hitting floor and my arms raised, it was the first time I felt all earthly power and sense of

control leave me completely. I was under the control of a spirit that I understood was God animating my body. I wasn't myself anymore. But who was I?

In that single moment of epiphany, with me on my knees with arms raised, I underwent what is known as an out-of-body experience. I felt as though I was looking down at myself, kneeling there, overcome with powerlessness over what would happen next. The Towers had been burning now for almost an hour, and the intensity of the flame and black smoke grew to blot out the entire blue sky. The ensuing darkness was of biblical proportions. It was then we began to hear live reports of people choosing to jump to their deaths from 100 stories up rather than be incinerated by 1,000 degree flames and suffocating black toxic smoke. This news was shattering. I was filled with rage, hostility, sadness and sorrow, the likes of which I've never felt before or since. Strangely, my thoughts turned to the Holocaust. I was starting to comprehend what it meant for six million Jews, including one and a half million children, to have their lives extinguished by pure evil. That day, which later became known as 9/11, changed me and drove me to become a believer.

While witnessing pure evil on a massive scale, as in the case of the Holocaust and the attacks of 9/11, can often cause people to abandon their faith in God, in my case, the effect was the opposite. I was changed by the horror before my eyes. But I was driven closer, not further from God.

My heart and soul changed that day as well. I received God in my spirit, and honored Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of my life. I understood correctly that Holy War had been declared on Western Civilization, on Christianity, on Judaism, on America and on Israel by radical Islamic terrorists. Even if others were still living naïvely with their heads in the sand, I was seeing things clearly and in sharp focus, perhaps for the first time in my life.

The Jihadists were at war with us, even if some refused to acknowledge it. I realized at that moment that I could no longer



be a passive participant sitting idly on sidelines of this battle. It was time to step up to the plate and get involved. Starting at that moment, I began to feel a strong encompassing allegiance to Israel. It was and remains based on the common Judeo-Christian ethical bedrock into which the foundation of our American republic as well as the State of Israel are both strongly founded.

We watched with gaping mouths and crimson eyes in mute horror as the buildings started to buckle and the South Tower collapsed at 9:59 am, less than 1 hour after being hit. This was followed by the collapse of the North Tower at 10:28 am. This was where some of my closest childhood friends were working. I watched dumbstruck as the building, and my childhood memories, imploded and as my friends were crushed into rubble before my eyes. The structure cascaded downward in a deadly pancaking motion, forming a twisted pile of burning debris, smoke and throwing up a dust cloud the likes of which could only be imagined coming straight out of the pit of hell.

It was soon made clear that the radical Islamic Jihadists of Al Qaeda, with Osama Bin Laden as its master architect, pulled this off. Soon news reports depicted in sickening clarity how Al Qaeda supporters in Gaza were dancing in the streets, handing candy to children, and celebrating over the death and destruction of nearly 3,000 lives.

The tragic events of 9/11 changed many lives irrevocably, and, as I said, mine was among them. I realized through my shock, my horror, my sadness and anger, that I was no longer living for myself, but that God had a specific plan and purpose for my life. I understood that I was being called into a higher service for Him, and I turned my life over in obedience to Jesus Christ — willingly and out of a sense of love and devotion. I was determined to allow His purposes to drive my life forward in whatever direction I was destined to go. I promised myself, and later to Sandra, that I would serve Him in whatever capacity He wished to call me. I would allow Him to use my life as a living sacrifice.

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I soon learned, however, that His timing doesn't necessarily allow for such service to begin instantly. It takes time to prepare a person for such an undertaking. It takes time for a follower to grow into the person He needs you to be. Often, this preparation and refinement can take years in order to shape and to mold a person for such service. I realized that I needed to be patient and that was okay. All I knew at this point — as I stood amidst the death and devastation around me— was that I was now at Ground Zero. The Ground Zero of my life. Simply put, I was now His and He was now mine. I knew for whom I was living and to whom I now belonged.

Over the coming months and years, the components of the Zionist I was to become began to form inside of me as my interest in Israel grew. I began developing a kinship with a nation that confronts the evil face of terrorism constantly. In Israel, I soon learned, every day is September the 11th.

Yes, my path to becoming a serious Zionist began that day and led me on what you might call a “Godyssey” of discovery over the ensuing two decades. It is for the purpose of chronicling that amazing adventure that I have written this book and it is the reason that I now invite you to look back and share that road with me on my Gentile's Journey to Zionism.