

CHAPTER ONE

My Come-to-Jesus Meeting

Atlantic City, New Jersey, located on Absecon Island on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, is a strange place. Once the inspiration for the popular board game *Monopoly* and a summer mecca for wealthy vacationers who flocked to the beach for fresh air and cool ocean breezes, this resort town on the Jersey Shore has developed into a sad dichotomy. From 1921 through 2005, it was known around the United States as the home of the Miss America pageant. In its heyday in the 1960s, the pageant drew around 85 million television viewers to the famous Atlantic City boardwalk. But a lot has changed since then.

Gone are the well-dressed women in high heels, shirtwaist dresses, and white gloves and the men who wore suits, ties, shiny Florsheims, and fashionable felt hats. Today's Atlantic City is known for its large, glitzy casinos on the one hand, and its slums on the other.

Although it's nicknamed "America's Playground," the city has seen its share of gambling-related suicides over the years. This "playground" has seduced the very rich out of their fortunes and the not-so-rich out of their life savings. In August 1999, a 36-year-old lawyer from Naples, Florida, hurled himself off the seventh floor of what was then the Trump Plaza Hotel after reportedly losing \$87,000 in the casino. In 2025, that would amount to around \$160,000. The same month, a German tourist jumped to his death from a casino parking garage.

The city has been associated with luxury brands, celebrity entertainment, fancy restaurants, drugs, corruption, gangsters, abandoned buildings, and abject squalor. Yet, in the midst of this peculiar dichotomy stands a little oasis. Its humble stone building, more than a hundred years

old, resides merely feet from a massive parking garage that services the towering Tropicana hotel and casino. On top of this old stone building sits a big red and white sign that has been there almost as long as the building itself. It proclaims, "Christ Died for Our Sins."

The oasis is Chelsea Baptist Church, in the heart of Atlantic City; and that is where I first met Saul Greenberg. I was 28. He was 73. It was the first time he had ever stepped foot inside a church. Born in 1912 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Saul was old-school Jewish. He grew up in the day when most Jewish people were taught to avoid Christians like the plague because of the centuries of persecution they suffered so unjustly in the name of Christ. Many would cross the street to avoid even walking by a church. But someone had persuaded Saul to come that summer evening in 1986 because the church was hosting a special event, a Thank God for Israel program organized by The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry (FOI), an evangelical-Christian, Bible-teaching organization that profoundly loves Israel and the Jewish people.

I was a young man interning with FOI. Unlike Saul, I grew up in the church. So did my mother, her mother, and her mother before her ad infinitum. I was born into a family of stalwart Methodists who took their Christianity seriously. They didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't play cards, and didn't do anything on Sunday other than go to church in the morning and go to sleep in the afternoon.

On summer weekends, we'd often drive to my great aunt's house in Ocean City, a beautiful part of the Jersey Shore. But the trips bored me to death because my family refused to go to the beach on Sunday or conduct any commerce. They even paid for their restaurant meals in advance on Saturday so they wouldn't have to handle money on the Lord's Day (Sunday). It was a restrictive, legalistic interpretation of Christianity that I didn't care for. But I was a child and didn't know better.

My family hailed from the little town of Riverside, New Jersey, where no one let me forget that I was Charlie Perry's great-grandson. Not that I wanted to forget it. I loved my great-grandfather. Charles H. Perry was a man of impeccable integrity. He was highly esteemed by everyone who knew him or did business with him, and his reputation as a godly Christian gentleman followed him wherever he went. It was a lot to live up to. And when I was young, I didn't do a good job of it. My mother, Vera, Charlie Perry's granddaughter, ran a tight ship; and

I was a mutineer.

The soft, gentle touch in my life came from my grandmother, Charlie Perry's daughter, Estella, my wonderful nana. It was to her I ran regularly for refuge. Nan was only 43 when I was born, and she had been widowed for years. Her godly husband died at age 35. Since she and Mom were both only children, I became the primary object of their attention.

Unlike my mom, Nan was not a perfectionist. She wasn't routine-driven or meticulous and demanding like my mother, who hollered a lot and leaned heavily into the philosophy of "my way or the highway"—all of which she told me later in life she sorely regretted. As my mom matured in her faith, she grew into a wise, gentle, deeply committed Christian who made prayer the priority of her life. But when I was young, it was my grandmother who set the example for me. She was easygoing, soft-spoken, and showered me with love and affection.

Needless to say, I was in Sunday school and church every time the doors opened, and because Nan was the church organist, I often accompanied her to church during the week when she practiced. As a youngster, I once announced to everyone that I planned to become a preacher. That was before I even became a Christian. But the announcement thrilled my mom to no end. She had me pose for a photograph holding my Bible and then proceeded to tell everyone about my avowed destiny. Whereas my mother in those days proved a force to be reckoned with, my nana exuded a sweet, gentle spirit that loved the Lord Jesus and loved me.

Nan was devoted to the Lord. When she was 15, she attended a function at the Collingswood, New Jersey, United Methodist Church where she became instant and lifelong friends with a girl she met there named Ruth Duvall. Ruth later married famed evangelist Percy Crawford, known for his radio ministry in Philadelphia, *Young People's Church of the Air*. Percy's fervent desire to reach America's youth with the gospel led him to establish both a Christian summer camp in 1933 known as Pinebrook Bible Conference and The King's College in 1938.

Nan often took the train into Philadelphia to visit Ruth and watch Percy's radio broadcasts. After Percy and Ruth had children, Nan's birthday presents to them became the only gifts Percy let them open on the air. Percy's heir in youth ministry was a young evangelist named

Jack Wyrzten (1913–1996), who founded Word of Life Fellowship, a well-known ministry to young people that today spans the globe with youth camps and Bible institutes.

When Percy died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 1960, Nan grieved for her dear friend and attended the funeral. Ruth seated her with the family, directly behind evangelist Billy Graham, who was the main speaker, and Jack Wyrzten.

Nan showed me true Christianity by her loving, gentle ways and tried to guide me in a positive direction. In 1965, she guided me toward the Rev. Billy Graham (1918–2018). That year, Billy Graham’s World Wide Pictures produced its first feature film, *The Restless Ones*, about a teenager who struggles with the problems of dating, drugs, and peer pressure. The film concludes with Billy Graham himself delivering a short message and inviting people to repent of their sins and give their lives to Christ. So, Nan bought tickets and brought me. I was 8 years old. But the movie spoke to me in a way nothing else had. I sat in that school auditorium mesmerized.

I didn’t dabble in drugs or drinking, but that didn’t matter. I knew I dabbled in sin. No one had to tell me. I was a bratty kid who lied and cheated and even stole a transistor radio—from my pastor, no less. I returned it, but the theft weighed me down spiritually and showed me the sinfulness of my heart. As I watched the film, I kept thinking, *What if Jesus returns today? I’m not saved. I’m going to Hell.*

I never questioned the doctrine that Jesus Christ will return to carry His church to Heaven. The apostle Paul told the Thessalonians,

*The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up [Latin, *rapturo*, “raptured”] together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).*

I knew enough Scripture to know the Bible says Jesus will snatch Christians away in a flash and, ultimately, consign all unbelievers to the Lake of Fire for eternity (Revelation 20:11–15). I believed this teaching then, and I believe it even more adamantly now, 60 years later, even

though many churches today seem to have lost their zeal for preaching it.

I also knew the Rapture wouldn't be a long, drawn-out affair. It will happen suddenly, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Corinthians 15:52). Poof! Now you see 'em, now you don't; and if that twinkling occurred before I became a believer, I'd be done for. My whole family would disappear into Jesus' arms, and I'd be left behind. I couldn't go to Heaven simply because they all were going. Their faith in Jesus didn't make me a Christian. I had to have my own faith. I had to believe Jesus died for me personally and that nothing I could do could remove the sin that stained my heart. Only Jesus could remove it.

Good works don't cut it with God. He requires faith. I had attended church and Sunday school from the day I was born. I'm sure my mother etched my name into the cradle roll before I exited the womb. But my pedigree couldn't save me. As I watched that movie, I finally saw myself as a sinner. Overcome with guilt, I wanted forgiveness.

So, when Billy Graham came on the screen and invited me to repent and accept Christ as my personal Savior, I felt like bolting out of my seat and running toward the front of the auditorium to pray. I turned to Nana and asked her what to do. She encouraged me to go forward. As I stood in the midst of the mob of individuals who also had gone forward, a counselor trained by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) came and stood next to me. She shared the gospel with me, explaining that we're all sinners—it wasn't just me—and that Jesus took the punishment we deserve, died, rose from the dead, and was prepared to forgive me if I repented. All I had to do was go to Him in sincere faith and ask Him to forgive me and give me His gift of everlasting life.

This time the gospel became more than intellectual knowledge to me. It pierced my heart. The BGEA counselor prayed with me, and that day I was born again into the family of God. I was saved. I knew I was going to Heaven; and I knew that if Jesus returned that day, He'd return for me. I'd go with Him.

I still struggled with lying and disobedience, but now I knew where to go with my sin. I knew I could take it to Jesus. Scripture says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). No one in this life can ever become sinless. That attribute belongs to God alone. But

when we belong to Christ, He makes us aware of our transgressions and gives us the desire and power to overcome them. So, when I knew I messed up, I repented, went to Jesus, and asked Him to forgive me; and I started to grow as a believer in Christ.

Over the next year or so, the BGEA taught me through free correspondence courses. I received brief Bible lessons in the mail, did them, mailed them back, and was rewarded with handwritten comments on my lessons, along with notes of encouragement. All these years later, I still marvel at how diligently and faithfully the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association disciplined me in the truths of God's Word.

By the time I entered high school, my church had changed. The teaching deteriorated because it digressed from God's Word. So, I began attending a Baptist church. To my great delight, the Baptist church sat just down the road from a synagogue, and one of my Sunday school teachers was married to a Jewish man. He never came to church, but his very existence intrigued me.

I had been learning about the Jewish people my whole life. You can't read the Bible without bumping into Jewish people. The Bible is a Jewish work. Its 66 books, with the exception of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, were written by Jewish men to tell the world about the God of Israel and His plan to save humanity through Israel's Messiah.

I had never met anyone Jewish and didn't understand why Jewish people didn't believe in Jesus. *They're so important to God*, I thought. *How did they miss the fact that Jesus is their Messiah and that He loves them?* When my Sunday school teacher promised to take me to the synagogue, I got so excited I started wearing a Star of David around my neck, along with my cross.

Unfortunately, my Sunday school teacher never had the opportunity to bring me to the synagogue. The Lord, however, brought me to a different church in 1976: Calvary Baptist Church in rural Pemberton, New Jersey; and that is where He began working on me in earnest.

Calvary's founding pastor was the Rev. Marvin J. Rosenthal (1935–2022), a dynamic Jewish believer in Jesus. By now, Marv no longer pastored because he had taken over as executive director of The Friends of Israel. But the people at Calvary still loved him. Under his leadership, the church had grown exponentially, both numerically and spiritually. Congregants learned the Old Testament well, along with the Jewish

people's importance in God's economy. Earl Emmons, a godly, well-known, respected farmer in the area and the chairman of Calvary's deacon board, also sat on the FOI board of trustees. It was the perfect church for me.

Like most Baptist churches, Calvary held Vacation Bible School (VBS) for the children in the summer. But Calvary added something extra: VBS for the adults. In the summer of 1978, the VBS theme revolved around the Jewish Tabernacle in the wilderness from Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers—three of the Five Books of Moses: the Torah.

The main speaker was FOI's Central States Director David M. Levy, who later became director of FOI's International ministries. He taught the adults in the sanctuary upstairs, while church members taught the children and worked on craft projects with them downstairs. Years later, David's messages formed the foundation of his famous book, *The Tabernacle*, today considered a premier work on this important subject.

Hearing David changed my life. In all my years going to church (by now I was 20), I had never heard anything even close to what David Levy preached. The message about the scapegoat in Leviticus 16 hit me the hardest. This divine commandment instituted the Jewish Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*. Through Moses, God told Aaron, the high priest, to bring two goats to the door of the Tabernacle:

Then Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats: one lot for the LORD and the other lot for the scapegoat. And Aaron shall bring the goat on which the LORD's lot fell, and offer it as a sin offering. But the goat on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, and to let it go as the scapegoat into the wilderness (vv. 8–10).

The imagery leaped out at me. It was crystal clear. The scapegoat that bore the Israelites' sins was sent outside the camp to die in the wilderness. What a perfect picture of Jesus, who "bore the sin of many" (Isaiah 53:12) and died outside the gates of Jerusalem. David's teaching blew me away. I began to appreciate how tightly everything in the Bible fit together. After hearing him, I longed to hear more.

After a litany of secular jobs and a taste of the emptiness the world had to offer, I begged God to change my life. Someone invited me to a

Friends of Israel banquet, and there I met Marv Rosenthal. I grabbed a napkin; wrote my name, address, and telephone number on it; gave it to a staff member at FOI; and told him to give me a call if FOI needed help in the office.

Someone called in October 1979, and I was hired on the spot in the Shipping Department. For the next seven years, I sat at the feet of some of the finest Bible teachers, including Will Varner, David Levy, Marv Rosenthal, and Marv's brother Stan Rosenthal. I had never heard such erudite teaching. They concentrated primarily on the Old Testament, making it exciting and relevant. I devoured their messages and could have listened to them every day, all day long.

I couldn't get enough of God's Word. I also began to understand the importance of sharing the gospel with the Jewish people. Before long, I knew the Lord was calling me into Jewish ministry. Marv became like a second father to me. He enabled me to finish my bachelor's degree at what was then Philadelphia College of Bible (now Cairn University). His secretaries typed my papers. When I needed a book I couldn't afford, Marv told me to get it off his bookshelf. He gave me his briefcase; his leather jacket; and all the encouragement and support a poor, struggling young preacher could want. When I graduated, I went directly into the FOI internship program in Atlantic City, where I lived in the summer of 1986 when I first met Saul.