

JAMES BRYAN SMITH

FOREWORD BY DALLAS WILLARD

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The Five People You Meet in Heaven."

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ROOM OF MARVELS

A Story About Heaven
that Heals the Heart

EXPANDED EDITION



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CHAPTER ONE

I WAS SITTING IN MY CAR in a long line at a Massachusetts toll booth. Rain drizzled on my windshield as my car came to a dead stop. I glanced down at the brochure lying on the passenger seat and picked it up with my right hand. “St. Stephen Episcopal Monastery.” Below the title was a glossy picture of an old stone building beside a river. “A place to rest, a place to grow spiritually, a place to find stillness. Directed or private retreats available.” I wanted to get out of this line and turn back, but I was trapped by the crush of cars inching along. My pastor had given me the brochure a month ago.

“You need to take some time away, Tim. You need to deal with your grief,” he said. He was right. But the last place I wanted to go was some smoke-and-mirrors religious retreat center.

I glanced at my watch. It was 11:11 a.m. when my old Volvo passed out of the ordinary world, through the stone gateway, and onto the gravel driveway of the monastery. The stone building looked like a fortress. I passed under the archway entrance, looked back at my car one last time, turned, and kept moving forward. The reception area was

completely silent. Wooden paneling covered the walls. The front desk was occupied by a woman with white hair and cat-eye glasses. She looked up from her book and said, “May I help you?”

“Yes, I hope so. I am here for a private retreat. My name is Tim Hudson,” I said, reaching out my hand to shake hers.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Hudson.” Her voice was cultivated, with a slight New England accent. “Are you the Tim Hudson who writes books?”

“Well, I have written a few—”

“How lovely to meet you. I’ve read some of your books. I just finished *God’s on Your Side* last week. I enjoyed it very much. My sister in Seattle heard you speak there three years ago, and she gave me one of your books for Christmas last year. Since then I have read them all. It is an honor to have you here. Will you be teaching while you are here?”

“No, I am here for . . . I just need some time to . . .”

“Recharge the spiritual batteries?” she said as she made a small notation on an index card.

“You could say that. Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“My name is Virginia. It’s so nice to meet you. Well, you have certainly come to a beautiful place. Most of the rooms have a lovely view of the river. We have some enchanting gardens, or you can stroll up and down the banks—as long as you stay on the grounds! Which reminds me, if you would give me your car keys, I will have one of the brothers move your car to the lot in the back.”

I took my keys out of my pocket and stared at them for a moment before handing them to her.

“It looks like you have requested a five-day silent retreat, is that correct?” she said while placing my keys on a hook behind her desk.

“Yes.”

“Very well. The meals are at 8:00 a.m., 12:00, and 5:00 p.m., and everyone is silent except the reader. One of the brothers will be reading from the Bible or from some devotional book. Matins is at 6:30 a.m., morning prayer is at 9:00 a.m., afternoon prayers are at 3:00 p.m., and compline is at 9:00 p.m. Your meeting with your spiritual director is every afternoon at 2:00 with Brother Taylor.”

“I am sorry, what did you say?” I asked.

“Your meeting with your spiritual director is—”

“But I didn’t request a spiritual director.”

“Oh, I know. It is a part of the silent retreat. No extra charge. Of course, you don’t have to go, but we highly recommend it. Five days is a long time in solitude. And besides, we all need a little help on our journey now and then.”

“I suppose you’re right. Right now I just need to rest a bit.”

“Your room is number 322. It is up those stairs on your left. Brother Taylor will meet with you in the study, which is room 111, down that hallway.”

The stairs, like most of the building, were made of stone. My room—my cell, as they called it—was twelve feet by six feet. “Now I know why they call it a cell,” I mumbled to myself as I stood in the doorway. The sparse room consisted of a single bed, a small desk with a wooden chair, and a wardrobe. I put my suitcase down and walked to the window. I lifted up the shade to find myself staring at a

brick wall. *Some view*, I thought. *Just my luck—I get to look at a brick wall for five days.* I lay down on the bed in my room without a view and quickly fell asleep.

Without an alarm I awoke at a quarter to two. I ambled down the stairs and through the hallway looking for room 111, which was at the very end. I knocked on the door and heard a voice say, “One minute, please.” Soon the door opened and before me stood a man in his early forties, not much older than me.

“I am Brother Taylor. C’mon on in. You must be Tim.”

“Yes, I am,” I said as I walked into a study with all four walls covered with books. “Are all these yours?”

“No, we share this study. These belong to the monastery. We give up all of our possessions when we join.”

“Oh, right.”

“Have a seat, Tim,” he said, pointing to an overstuffed chair. He sat down in a chair across from me.

Even seated, he was an imposing figure. He wasn’t tall, but he had the build of a wrestler, and despite his age his hair was thick though gray. *What sort of man*, I wondered, *becomes a monk?* While watching him watching me, I noticed that beneath his cowl he was wearing jogging shoes and sweatpants. He caught my eye as I glanced at the frayed cuffs of his sweatpants, and the corners of his mouth twitched. I realized that he was smiling. I broke the silence when I could not stand it anymore and stammered out the first thing I could think of. “This is a lovely place.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

It was so quiet I could hear my watch ticking.

“It took me about five hours to get here. I came from Connecticut. I, uh, am a writer.”

“Oh really, what kinds of books do you write?” he asked, leaning forward with a curious smile.

“You didn’t know I was a writer?”

“No. I’m sorry. Should I?”

“No. I mean, not really. I write spiritual books.”

Once again we sat in silence. He was clearly unimpressed that I was a writer. He sat with his hands folded in his lap and continued to stare at me. The silence was unnerving. Finally he asked, “How would you describe your spiritual life right now, Tim?”

“Um, it’s okay, I guess. I could use a little rest.”

“How would you describe your relationship with God?”

“Gee, isn’t that a little personal? Couldn’t we talk about the weather for a few minutes before you peer into my soul?”

“I am not sure we have that kind of time.”

“I have five days here. I have lots of time.”

“Do you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tim, you must have come here for a reason. People don’t usually take five days of their lives to come and stay with us for no reason. Let me ask it another way. What is hurting you?”

“Well,” I said, taking a deep breath, “you could say that I have become a hypocrite.” I could no longer make eye contact. I stared out the window.

“How so?”

“I am having trouble believing the things I have written.”

“What have you written?”

“I wrote a book about how God is *good*. I tell people to turn their lives over to God. I write about how God is fair and merciful and just. It’s just . . .”

“Just what?”

“I don’t believe it anymore.”

“Believe what?”

“That God is . . . good.”

“Why is that?”

I looked down at my shoes and took a deep breath.

“Because God is not good,” I blurted out. My face instantly flushed with rage.

“Not good?”

I closed my eyes and took another deep breath. My heart began to race. The anger I was about to unleash had been kept deep inside my heart, never spoken to anyone, not even to myself.

“Four years ago my wife and I were so excited when we got the news that she was pregnant with a little girl. We already had a bright, healthy four-year-old boy, and now we were having a girl. I had written some books, and my career seemed to be on the rise. My life could not have been better—a great wife, a great boy, a great career, and now a baby girl. Life was perfect. Then, a few weeks before our daughter was to have been born, the doctor noticed that Rachel had not been gaining weight. She asked for her to have a sonogram, just to make sure everything was all right. During that sonogram they noticed that the baby had a cleft lip and a cluster of other defects. They suspected that the

baby had a rare chromosomal disorder and would likely die during her birth. We were told by the doctors to plan her funeral—before she was even born. Can you imagine that? We spent months decorating her room, painting it pink and assembling her crib, and now we were told to be prepared for her to die in the delivery room.”

I covered my face with my hands, ashamed of the tears that were now running down my cheeks. Brother Taylor walked to my chair, knelt beside me, and gently put his arm around me.

“I am sorry, Tim.” He handed me a tissue and returned to his chair. He closed his eyes, as if he were starting to pray. We sat together for a few minutes in silence. I then took a deep breath and resumed.

“Well, she didn’t die. She was born with a number of birth defects, and we did all we could to help her survive. We flew her to New York for open-heart surgery, which seemed to help. We just kept hoping and praying, asking God for a miracle. She couldn’t feed herself, so we fed her through a feeding tube in her stomach. She had around-the-clock medical care from my wife. For the next two years we spent more time in the hospital than at home. We slept on hard floors and prayed and prayed that God would heal her. She managed to outlive all of the doctors’ prognoses—none of them thought she would live to the age of two.”

I stopped for a moment and took another deep breath.

“We managed pretty well, despite the fact that our home was filled with medical equipment, and once a month we would have to go back into the hospital for more surgery.

When she was just a year and a half we were hit with the second blow. One of my closest friends, a committed Christian who served God far beyond what I have done, was killed in a car accident. He lived in our attic apartment for two years. I loved him like a brother. He was a songwriter, and he had written a beautiful song for our daughter, Madison, because he was so moved by her. He was only forty; he was too young to die. He spent his life giving glory to God and serving the poor, and then he died on the pavement of a rain-soaked highway. How could God have taken him? He was one of the most faithful people I ever met. Countless people were moved by his music. Then suddenly he was gone.”

We both sat in silence for a few minutes. I knew the next part would be difficult to tell.

“That’s not all. Six months after my friend Wayne died, Madison also died. Catch this—after a routine operation, when she seemed to be fine, she suddenly went into a coma and died within forty-eight hours.”

Suddenly the memory of that day flooded my mind. I remembered looking out from the third-floor window of the hospital room. The traffic below flowed on as if nothing had happened. The cars moved and stopped and pulled into fast-food restaurants or parking lots. People were crossing the street, talking and laughing. I thought, *Don’t they know what just happened? How can they not know? How can they go on living as if nothing has happened?* I leaned against the window pane as tears ran from my cheek to the glass and down, like quiet rain.

“Would you like to hold her one last time?” the nurse asked. I sat down in a chair, preparing for someone to hand me my daughter, as I had done a thousand times, but this time would be the last. The nurse offered her lifeless body to me, and I cradled her in my arms. She was still warm. She felt alive, but she was gone from that little body. Forty minutes ago the doctors were trying to keep her alive, applying electric shock to her heart with tiny paddles. We stared at the heart monitor. It stopped and started several times. It was as if she were being pulled away from me but trying to stay. After a while I could see her body was tired. I leaned in and whispered into her ear, “It’s okay, sweet girl, you put up a good fight, you go on with the angels. Daddy will see you soon.” My body began to tremble, so much that her bed started to shake. The heart monitor stopped and never came back on.

I felt my pulse quickening from the memory. The anger began to well up in my throat. I stood up and shouted, “Where was God, Brother Taylor? *I was there!* Where was *he?*”

He didn’t answer my question. He closed his eyes as if he were praying. I saw a tear forming in the corner of his eye.

“For two years now I’ve tried to go on as if everything was still okay—you know, ‘God’s in heaven and all’s right in the world,’ but just a year after Madison died, my mother died of a heart attack. She was seventy, but she was in good health. She ate right and was active, and suddenly she was gone. She was my North Star. No matter where I was or what I was going through, I could navigate my life because of her. She was my constant in the midst of the

chaos. Now that she's gone, I'm completely disoriented. Within three years I've lost my dear friend, my daughter, and my mother—three people who occupy a special place in my heart. I know people die. I know that we are all going to die eventually. It's just . . .”

“Just what, Tim?”

“It's just . . . that it seems so unfair,” I finished lamely, knowing I sounded exactly like a discontented schoolboy.

“What's unfair?”

In a rush of anger, my words tumbled out, “I tried hard to please God, to do what is right. I know I am not perfect, not even close, but I am on God's team, for heaven's sake! I am one of God's friends. I mean, I see these horrible parents—drug-addicted, abusive parents—with healthy kids. Why did we have to have a child born with some rare disorder? Why, Brother Taylor? Why? Why did my friend Wayne die? Why did my mother die so soon? I am sick of funerals!”

He didn't bother to answer my questions. He simply sat there, looking at me.

“Thank you for sharing that with me, Tim. I will be praying for you. Let's meet again tomorrow.”

“What? That's all you have to say? I pour my guts out, and you just say, ‘See you tomorrow’? C'mon, Brother Taylor, you gotta give me more than that. I am about to abandon my faith. I need your help.”

“You need to be silent, Tim, and you have come to the right place. What you need to do is relax and be still for a while. I want you to let go of your need to be in control.”

“Who said I have a need to be in control?”

“Who doesn’t, Tim?”

“Well . . . yeah.” We sat there, in silence. Irritated, I shifted position, crossed and uncrossed my arms, and again, feeling a bit like a schoolboy now caught in the principal’s office. “But . . .”

“Relax, Tim.”

“What am I supposed to do for the next twenty-four hours?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? My assignment is to do nothing.”

“That is precisely what you need to do. Don’t do anything that accomplishes something. Take a walk by the river. Sit in the garden. Breathe the air. Slow down. Become present where you are. See you tomorrow, Tim. I will be praying for you. God bless.”

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