



IT HAPPENED TO ME

JAMES MACDONALD

Gripped by the Worship of God

Provision in Elgin

My wife and I began Harvest Bible Chapel in the late 1980's with a committed group of pioneers and a vision to see God powerfully at work. Of course we have had our setbacks and challenges (I often joke, "I gave up my hair for this church") but for the most part, we have been witness to a sustained display of God's greatness.

By the time Harvest Bible Chapel was thirteen years old, our weekly services were maxed out—we couldn't add any more services; we couldn't add any more parking. It was obvious that we needed to find new property large enough and close enough on which to relocate. After two agonizing years, we uncovered a piece of land perfectly suited for our needs. Problem: the property was owned by the Catholic Church and they don't sell much—especially not to an evangelical church. Nevertheless, our church's history is one of multiplied miraculous answers to prayer and so we set about to test the promises of God.

I filled my heart with faith based on Mark 11:24, “*Whatever you ask in My name, believe that you have received it and it shall be done for you*” and I repeatedly went out on the property to walk and pray. Our elders gathered on the vacant land holding hands in a circle, calling out to God by faith and asking Him to give us this land.

Behind the scenes it really appeared like He would. Doors that were previously slammed shut began to open. Key people within the ranks of the Catholic hierarchy began to soften to the idea of selling us the land even to the point of contacting us and inviting an offer. I continued to pray as the private negotiations accelerated, telling our church on several occasions that a miracle was imminent that would “blow their minds.” So focused I became on “claiming this mountain” that I hardly thought of anything else.

I begged God to do this work and put myself in a very dangerous position spiritually. Psalm 106:15 says God “gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul” [NKJV].

God doesn’t want us to long for His works more than we long for Him. God is not a heavenly genie waiting reluctantly till we rub the lamp the right way. We must be very careful of begging God to do some specific work in a way that quenches our thirst for Him and His greatness alone.

Praying and pleading for a specific something as I had been made me very vulnerable. So when the news came that we would *not* be getting the property, I was devastated.

More than ever before, I faced a crisis in my own faith, finding it so hard to understand why God would have refused the only possibility for our future *that I could see*. I struggled so much that I changed my preaching plan and started a new series, “God @ Work, Even When I’m Not Seeing It.”

In this study, as much for my own challenge as it was for our church’s, I searched God’s Word for hope that He works even when we can’t see it. I studied Jacob who said, “Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it” (Genesis 28:16). I studied the plan of God that silently unfolded in the book of Ruth. I preached on Esther, an amazing Old Testament book that tells of God’s great work without even mentioning His name. This was the final six weeks of 2002 and then into January of 2003. *Where are You, God? What are You doing? I believe You’re working but I am sure not seeing it.*

That painful prayer was more accurate than I could have imagined.

Late in January, we were made aware of a corporate building on eighty-five acres of land twenty miles away from our church location. We hadn’t considered it before because it was outside our search area. We needed to stay close to our current location because we would need to sell it in order to get into a new property, or so it seemed to our finite minds.

This new property was owned by the Green family from Oklahoma City; you might know them as the owner of the store chain, Hobby Lobby. The property included a 285,000 sq.

ft. building with a 900-car parking garage on a major four-lane road west of Elgin, Illinois. It was purchased and built in 1993 at a cost of \$53 million.

But get this (*this is amazing*)—this property was available as *a gift* from the Greens to a ministry of their choice, with the specification that the property could not be resold, that the recipient must demonstrate a similarity of conviction, and a readiness to bear the financial cost of developing the site into a meaningful center of gospel ministry.

Understandably, I was very excited because the nature of this amazing gift would allow us to continue to expand our ministry as a multi-campus church and continue ministry at our current site. The opportunity seemed perfect beyond words, but I determined in my heart I would never again get attached to a particular property as God's will for our church. I wanted to want God Himself and *all* His works, not a particular possibility that appeared the way He should do it.

We flew to Oklahoma City, met this wonderful family, and made known our vision for the property. I will never forget their words at our departure. "Well, everyone has told us what they believe God wants to do; now we're waiting for God to vote, and when He does, we'll let you know." Before, that would have seemed so far out of my control, but now it was perfect. My heart's condition was preparation for what God would do next.

We were told by the Green family that we were in the final running for the property with Jerry Falwell of Liberty University. I had never met Dr. Falwell but like most Americans,

I was familiar with his ministry. To me, he seemed larger than life. Imagine then my shock when in February 2003, he rang my cell phone. (I still don't know how he got the number.) He introduced himself and said, "I understand you're interested in the Hobby Lobby property." "Yes," I answered with a little shaky voice, not knowing what was coming next. "Well," he said, "we are flying down to Oklahoma City tomorrow and they are going to give the property to us." *Gulp.*

At that moment, I was glad that I had been praying with an open heart because the first words out of my mouth were a lot different than I could have prayed at any other time. "Well, that's good news for us, Dr. Falwell. We have been praying for God's will to be done and if that means the property is for you then we can get on to whatever He has in store for us."

If you know me, that was a real miracle of a response. But our conversation continued. He asked me all about our church and what we were doing and over the course of the conversation, I sensed a subtle change in his tone. Suddenly he confessed, "You know James, I am sixty-nine years old and really I have all I can handle right here in Lynchburg. I think I will fly down to Oklahoma City but I'm going to tell them that they ought to give the property to you." And that is exactly what he did.

Between Dr. Falwell's withdrawal and the Green families' own sense of the Lord's leading, within a few days we received the news that the property was ours! *Amazing, awesome provision of God.* A \$53 million dollar facility for our church for one dollar.

God is able to do “exceedingly, abundantly above all we could ask or think.” (Ephesians 3:20 NKJV). We could honestly testify to [Psalm 118:23](#), “This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”

My oldest son kind of tweaked me when he heard the exciting news, “Wow, I guess you really want that Catholic property now, huh Dad?” *Ouch*. What a not-so-gentle reminder that we can be confident God *is* working even when we can’t see it. Hopefully you can avoid the painful valley of doubt that came to me as a result of wanting a specific work of God rather than His plan, in His timing, and His way.

Here’s the lesson: God must be God and He will be. Our choices are worshipful submission or stubborn rebellion. Either we get to participate in the ultimate wisdom of what God is doing by choosing to worship at all times now. Or we miss the joy of partnership in His purposes by standing on the side with folded arms expecting God to explain Himself. How strongly I commend to you that first choice not matter how tough it may be in this moment. Choose to worship; choose words of praise and gratitude no matter how haltingly they come at first. Worship like that will find for you a fountain of joy reserved for those who want more than a simple surface faith. I can tell you that for sure, not just because I’ve seen it in others but because it happened to me.