

PROPHET

Frank E. Peretti

CROSSWAY BOOKS • WHEATON, ILLINOIS
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This Present Darkness

Piercing the Darkness

Tilly

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IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING

This novel is a creative work of fiction imparting spiritual truth in a symbolic manner, and not an emphatic statement of religious doctrine.

As usual, while I *am* dealing with real ideas, I'm not writing about any real persons, places or institutions.

—the author

Prophet.

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To Jan and Lane
true prophets in their own right

Acknowledgments

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Randy and friends who shared their intimate sorrows with me and helped me understand the abortion experience.

Hey, all of you get the credit for the things I've captured accurately — I'll take the blame for the mistakes.

Thanks.

JOHN Barrett heard God speak when he was ten years old. Years later all he would clearly remember about that Sunday night meeting at the Rainier Gospel Tabernacle was that it was close and sweaty, in the dead center of summer's heat. Noisy, too. It was altar time at the front of the church, the saints were praying and praising, and it was not the quiet, introspective kind of worship but the hollering kind, the throw-back-your-head-and-cry-to-Heaven kind as the women wept, the men shouted, and the piano kept playing over and over the strains of "I surrender all, I surrender all . . ."

Pastor Thompson, young and fiery, had preached a sermon that caught John by the heart. And when the altar call came and Pastor Thompson said, "If this word is for you, if God is speaking to your heart, I want you to come forward, lay your all on the altar . . ." John knew God was speaking to him, and he went forward, almost running, to kneel at that long mahogany prayer rail, his face flushed and his eyes streaming tears.

"Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world!" Pastor Thompson quoted the Scripture. "Will you receive that Lamb tonight? Will you find Jesus?"

John was ready to receive the Lamb, he was ready to find Jesus, and as he called on the name of the Lord, he could even see a lamb, small, gentle, spotless and white, right there in front of him, right on the other side of the prayer rail, so close he could have reached out and touched its nose. He was later told he'd had a vision, but at that moment he thought there really was a lamb in the church, as real as anything. The Lamb of God, like Pastor Thompson said. It was so real then, so long ago. It was a moment that truly stirred his soul.

But that moment, with all its feelings, its meanings, its transcendent, eternal words, even its little vision, would fade with time, and John would eventually tuck it away in a lost and forgotten corner of his memory.

He would not remember that he had done business with God, that he had made a covenant with the Creator when only a young boy — "Jesus, come into my heart and take away my sins. God, I give You my life. Use me, Lord. I'm Yours."

The memory of his father's hand on his shoulder would fade with time and adult ambitions, as would his father's words, spoken loudly and prophetically in the child's ear, as if from God Himself: "Ye are called, My son, ye are called. Before I formed thee in the womb, I knew thee, and before thou wert born I consecrated thee to My service. Walk in My Word, listen for My voice, for I will speak to thee and guide thee in all the paths you may take. Behold, I am with thee always . . ."

He would choose not to remember. ". . . in all thy ways acknowledge Me, and I shall direct thy paths . . ." Good words, useful words. Forgotten words. "And lo, I am with thee always, even unto the end of the age . . ." He would not remember.

But God remembered.

G OVERNOR, I plead with you, search your heart and change your course, for if you do not, God will change it for you. Though you have said to yourself, 'No one sees, and no one hears,' surely, the Lord sees, and He hears all that you think in your heart, all that you whisper, all that you speak in your private chambers. There is nothing hidden from the eyes of Him with whom we have to do!"

It was the Friday after Labor Day, still sunny, still summer, the early-evening shadows just beginning to stretch. Crowds of giddy party supporters were coming from their homes, jobs, early dinners, and schools to converge on The City's Flag Plaza for Governor Hiram Slater's big campaign kickoff rally. The Hi-Yo, Hiram! straw hats were already blooming in profusion and floating along on hundreds of heads like leaves on a river. Before the backdrop of the plaza's fifty state flags, a platform had been set up, draped in blue, festooned with red, white, and blue balloons and American flags, neatly arranged with rows of folding chairs and garnished with a full nursery's worth of potted chrysanthemums. Soon the rally would begin, and Governor Slater would make his campaign kickoff speech.

But as people entered the plaza, a stocky, gray-haired man in blue warehouse coveralls was already making a speech, standing on the edge of a concrete planter box, primroses at his feet, his head well above the crowd. The governor may or may not have been within earshot, but this man was going to shout to the governor anyway, his voice tinged with pain, with desperation.

"Like Nebuchadnezzar of old, you have set up an image of yourself for all men to follow, a towering image, a mighty image, an image far greater than yourself. But please take heed: the Lord would remind you, you are not that image. Though you may say, 'I am strong and invincible, I tower over the masses, I cannot be touched or harmed,' yet in truth you are as weak as any man, about to be harmed, about to be toppled!"

"Why don't you just shut up, big mouth!" yelled a beer-bellied contractor passing by.

"The Truth must be heard though the lie be a tumult," the man replied.

"Not him again," griped a mother with four children in tow.

"Get off that planter!" ordered a realtor in a business suit. "You don't belong up there."

A radical feminist publisher responded with the slogan "Hi-yo, Hiram!"

Those nearby picked up the slogan, louder and louder, and threw it at the man for pure spite. "Hi-yo, Hiram! Hi-yo, Hiram! Hi-yo, Hiram!"

They had stung him. He looked into their faces as pain filled his eyes, then pleaded, "The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him!"

Through the chanting a few voices could be heard responding in mock horror, "Ooooooooooooo!"

"Our God is there, ever present, and touched with our infirmities. He is speaking. We must be silent and listen!"

"Hi-yo, Hiram! Hi-yo, Hiram!"

Behind the platform, screened from visibility by blue curtains, Governor Slater, small, balding, with an unimpressively high-pitched voice, went over final details with the rally's organizers.

"Thirty minutes," he said. "I want thirty minutes even if you have to cut something."

Wilma Benthoff, the governor's campaign manager — and presently his harried rally organizer — pushed her wildly curled blonde hair away from her face so she could see her clipboard. "Okay, we'll do the 'National Anthem,' then Marv will introduce the dignitaries. Marv!" Marv didn't hear her; he was busy directing photographer traffic while tying balloons to the platform stairs. "MARV!"

He looked up. "The governor wants more time, so keep the introductions brief!"

He nodded and said something they couldn't hear. Benthoff went on, "Then the band will play . . . uh . . . Joyce, how many songs is the band going to play?" Joyce didn't hear her; she was standing too close to the trombone player practicing his scales. "Oh, forget it. We'll cut a tune out. I'll tell her."

The governor felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Martin Devin, one of the governor's staff members and would-be chief of staff. The tall, former college linebacker had an amused sneer on his face. "Our old friend the prophet is here."

The governor chuckled and shook his head. "As sure as the sun rises." He sneaked a peek through the curtain and could just see the old man's head above the crowd. "I wonder what his son must be thinking right now?"

"Especially when he see the ruckus on his own newscast! I called a friend at Channel 6 and they're moving their camera. They want it."

The governor's face brightened. "Always thinking, Martin, always thinking!"

Devin nodded, acknowledging the compliment. "So we just might have an opportunity coming up here . . ."

Leslie Albright, Channel 6 news reporter, carefully placed a molded earpiece in her ear and then found one square foot of ground to call her own as Mel the long-haired cameraman brought her face into clear focus. There were better places to shoot this story, better views of the plaza, better backgrounds, but orders were orders. Someday she was going to shoot Tina Lewis.

"John, this is where it all begins for Governor Hiram Slater . . ." she rehearsed in her professional news voice. "Undaunted by challenger Bob Wilson's showing in the polls . . ."

With one hand she held her NewsSix microphone and with the other her quickly jotted notes, which were trying to elude the grasp of the three fingers holding them. She tried to straighten her breeze-tousled blonde hair as she examined her reflection in the camera's lens. Gawkers were already waving to Mom behind Leslie's back.

"Undaunted by how well his challenger is doing in the polls . . . Even though Bob Wilson . . . Even though the polls show Bob Wilson coming on strong . . . uh . . . show Bob Wilson gaining support . . ."

"We've got about ten minutes," her earpiece crackled.

"Okay," she replied, and went back to rehearsing. "The governor has proven he has supporters too, as you can see by the vast crowd behind me . . ." And then she waxed sarcastic just to vent herself. "— which you could have seen better if we'd stayed up on the stairs instead of moving down here."

She adjusted her red suit jacket and tried to think her report through again. That guy standing on the planter behind her wasn't helping much.

"The Word of God says, 'Before you were formed in the womb, I knew you!'" he cried.

Oh brother. Now he's going to bring up that subject!

"I like it," said Tina Lewis, executive news producer. She was in the Channel 6 control room for this one; she knew it was going to be interesting.

Above the console where the show producer, director, and video switcher sat, the monitors on the wall flickered a visual three-ring circus with different things happening everywhere all at once so fast you could hardly keep up with it. Monitors One, Two, and Three showed the views from the three studio cameras on the news set below; the Preview Monitor framed whatever view would be next; the On Air Monitor showed what people at home were seeing; the news anchors were still in the middle of NewsSix at Five Thirty, pushing news stories through like cars on a speeding train.

"Camera Three, head-on to John," said Susan the director.

Camera Three moved in. Monitor Three and the Preview Monitor showed a tight head-and-shoulders shot of handsome, fortyish anchorman John Barrett looking into the camera.

"Pan for box." The camera moved to the right. "Box." The video switcher hit a button, and a nicely drawn beer can in a frame appeared in the upper-right corner of the screen.

"More trouble brewing for Bayley's Beer," said John Barrett. "Ever since the Bayley Brewery in Tobias contracted its aluminum can recycling to Northwest Materials . . ."

"Stand by Cassette Two." Cassette Two appeared freeze-framed on the Preview Monitor.

"... environmentalists have been hopping mad and foaming up a real storm ..."

"Roll Cassette Two." Button pressed. Cassette Two began to roll.

"... that could be coming to a head ..."

Cassette Two counted down — Three, two, one ...

"... Ken Davenport has the story."

On Air, Cassette Two: a shot of the brewery. Bayley Brewery title across bottom of screen. Ken Davenport's voice over the picture.

"Board Members of the Bayley Brewery met today in a closed meeting to determine what action, if any, they will take ..."

"Stand by Camera Two, head-on to Ali."

In Monitor Two, Ali Downs, co-anchor, a former model with jet black hair and almond eyes, sat ready to begin the next story.

In a black-and-white monitor near the ceiling, Leslie Albright stood before the remote camera, microphone, earpiece, and hair in place, waiting her turn to report. Behind her a fracas was growing.

"Look at that!" said Tina Lewis, almost awestruck. "Will you look at that!"

"You have turned your eyes from the slaughter you have championed! You have robbed the innocent of their lives!" said the man on the planter. "The Lord formed our inward parts. He wove us in our mother's womb, and we are fearfully and wonderfully made!"

That was all some of the crowd needed to hear. Hiram Slater was a pro-choice governor, and this was a pro-choice crowd. Things started getting quite vocal.

"You're at the wrong rally, bub!"

"Keep your bigoted views away from my body!"

"Would somebody pull him down from there?"

And through all the shouts and threats "Hi-yo, Hiram!" never missed a beat.

Leslie thought she heard a question through her earpiece. She held her hand over her other ear. "Say again please."

It was Rush Torrance, producer of the 5:30 newscast. "John still needs a scripted question to close your package."

"Um ... " Leslie looked behind her at the crowd coming to a rapid boil. "Things are changing kind of fast around here. He might want to ask me about the abortion issue ... you know, how that might be affecting the climate of the rally."

"So ... how do you want it phrased? You want him to —" The man on the planter was shouting something, the crowd was hollering louder than he was, and all of them were louder than Rush's voice in the earpiece.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you!"

"I'll have him ask you about the hot issues, all right? He'll ask you how it looks from where you stand. What's your outcue?"

"Um . . . I'll end with, 'This campaign could be an exciting roller coaster ride for both candidates, and the whole thing begins in just a few minutes.'"

"All right. Got it."

Leslie was getting nervous, anticipating an elbow in her ribs or a projectile on her head any moment. She asked Mel the cameraman, "You think we ought to move back a bit?"

"No," said Tina Lewis. In the studio they could hear everything Leslie was saying. "Stay right there. We're seeing everything. It looks great."

Rush Torrance passed the message along through his headset.

In the monitor Leslie cringed a little but stayed where she was while the crowd behind her became more dense and noisy. Fists were waving in the air.

The man on the planter was clearly visible above the crowd, gesturing and shouting, "Hear me! Volume and chanting and numbers and repetition and television coverage will not make a lie true!"

Then some coat hangers appeared, waving in the air above the crowd.

Tina chuckled. "They know they're on-camera."

Rush informed Leslie, "You're on after the break. Stand by."

On television screens all over the city and beyond, Ali Downs finished up a story. "Legislators hope the move will help displaced timber workers in time, but the timber workers say they'll believe it when they see it."

Two-shot: John Barrett and Ali Downs seated at the expansive, black-and-chrome news desk. In the upper background NewsSix in large blue letters. Center background: false TV monitor screens with faces, places, titles frozen in photographs. In the left background, through a false window, a false city skyline.

John Barrett started the tease: "Coming up next, Governor Hiram Slater's campaign for re-election starts with a citywide rally tonight. We'll go to the Flag Plaza live for an update."

Ali finished the tease. "And iguana lizards running for your health? See it for yourself?"

The screen cut to the teaser video: lizards pawing and licking at the camera lens.

Commercials.

"All right, Leslie," said Rush. "We're coming to you in two minutes."

The governor scanned his notes. If things kept going the way they were, he might have to change his text a little. "Sounds like things are heating up out there," he hinted to Martin Devin.

Devin had just returned from a reconnaissance peek. "Mr. Governor, you've got the crowd, you've got the camera. I think we ought to take advantage."

"You have something in mind?"

Devin lowered his voice. "I think we can get things a little rowdier. It could stir up some emotions, really get the crowd on your side, and it'll get the attention of the TV viewers."

The governor looked at his watch. "It's close to 6. When is Channel 6 going to carry us?"

Devin looked at his own watch. "Any minute. I think they want to close the 5:30 show with a live teaser and then come back at 7 to pick us up again."

The governor mulled it over, then smiled. "Okay. I'll be ready."

Devin smiled and hurried away.

In a tight little area behind some trees, out of sight, he dialed a number on his cellular phone. "Yeah, Willy, he went for it." He looked at his watch. "Keep your eye on that blonde reporter down there. Go when she goes."

"Fifteen seconds," said Mardell, the attractive, black floor director standing behind the cameras. "Leslie will be to your right."

John Barrett looked to the right unconsciously. At home viewers would see the anchors looking at a large screen with Leslie Albright on it. In the studio John and Ali would be looking at blank space, pretending a screen was there.

Mardell counted down with her fingers silently. Five, four, three, two, one . . .

In the control room Leslie had jumped from the black-and-white monitor to the large, color Preview Monitor, and the picture was impressive. There she was, her tension showing and her hair tousled despite her best efforts, holding her ground as a sea of enraged humanity boiled and bubbled behind her and one lone man continued his struggle to be heard above the tumult.

On Air, John Barrett intro'd the story, looking into Camera Three and reading the teleprompter script mirrored on the glass over the camera's lens. "Well, today is Day One of Governor Hiram Slater's campaign for re-election, and Leslie Albright is at the Flag Plaza right now for the big kickoff rally." Both he and Ali Downs turned and looked toward the wall. "Leslie?"

On televisions at home, there she was on what looked like a three by four foot screen propped on the end of the news desk.

Leslie looked right into the camera and started her report as rehearsed. "John, this is where it all begins for Governor Hiram Slater. Even though the polls show Bob Wilson gaining support, the governor has proven he has supporters too, as you can see by the vast crowd behind me."

As viewers at home saw the shot of Leslie jump from the screen that wasn't there to the full television screen, it wasn't clear just what that vast crowd was indicating, other than an impending riot.

But as John glanced sideways at his own monitor hidden in the top of the news desk, his attention was drawn to that one lone character sticking up above the crowd, his mouth moving, his hands gesturing. It seemed he was leading this mob.

"Roll Cassette One," said Susan the director, and Leslie's prepared video report began to play on the screen with Leslie's prerecorded voice narrating.

Video: the governor meeting folks, shaking hands, waving to the crowds.

Leslie's voice: "Governor Slater admits it will be a tough campaign, but insists he is ready for the battle and will pull no punches."

Video of the governor being interviewed. Sound up. The governor: "I think we have a head start, really. The past four years are a clear record of our accomplishments, and I stand on that record. We've moved ahead on education, employment opportunities, and women's rights, and we're going to keep after those issues."

John's face was getting redder, and it showed, even through the makeup. As he watched the live camera monitor showing what Mel's camera was seeing at that very moment, he could still see that rabble-rouser standing above the crowd. The monitor had no sound, but he could easily imagine what the old man was shouting. He dared not curse — he might be on the air. At least Leslie's video was still running on the air and people weren't seeing what he was seeing right now.

Leslie was ducking her head and looking behind her, at least while the video report was running. She kept trying to hear her next cue through her earpiece.

The crowd was starting to chant, "Pro-life, that's a lie — you don't care if women die!"

John grabbed his desk phone to talk to Rush Torrance. "Can't we get that kook off the screen? Rush? You there?"

No answer. Leslie was coming back on.

Mel the cameraman nodded furiously. "Yes! You're on, you're on!"

Leslie straightened, held the mike in a trembling hand, and almost shouted