

# The Penny

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# CHAPTER 1

## See a Penny, Pick it Up

*Unknown*

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Randal stared into the white cushion of the fold-up chair, grasping for words. He clasped his hands and leaned forward on his knees. "Lord," he muttered, then sighed. Frustrated and exhausted, he strained to find more words. In his mind, this might be the last time he asked for help in this ministry. He glanced up and perused the small storefront church, listening intently, hoping someone might utter the words light a fire in his spirit again. But, once again, the pastor found himself disappointed. Their quiet whispers and repetitious mutterings only quenched what few embers remained of the passion that once burned for God.

On most Saturday evenings, he felt obligated to lead his flock in prayer. Tonight, Randal could pretend no more. Two years of battling ulcerative colitis, dwindling membership and member apathy had taken its toll on him. Like many pastors in his position, he was a man on the verge of giving up and resigning his duties. He looked around, his emotions torn between pity and anger. He felt sorry because most of his members had been with him the entire eight years he and his wife had founded and worked with the church. Now he was deciding to close the doors. Still, he was angry because he had done his best to rouse his members to be more active over the past few years, but apathy and complacency crept in. Randal lowered his head into the seat of the chair and clasped his hands.

"Lord," he whispered low enough so no one else could hear. "I don't want to, but..."

He looked up at the ceiling. A tear rolled down his cheek. "Just...just help me Lord and give me a sign.

He normally announced the end of the prayer meeting over the microphone, but tonight, he was in no mood to do so. Randal rose, left the platform and walked down the aisle of folding chairs and out the front door. Outside, he leaned against the plate glass window and stared at the sky, wondering how he could feel so empty after a prayer meeting. In eighteen years of serving God, he had never felt so angry and bitter.

He pondered what work he might do after resigning. It had been five years since his last corporate job as a computer programmer. He knew that if he wanted to go back into that field, he would have to upgrade his skills and retrain. He had done janitorial work while in college at

Michigan State University. *Maybe I can do that again*, he thought. Randal shook his head and laughed, wondering if his sickness would allow him to get through an eight-hour workday. Since leaving his last job and becoming a full-time pastor, his daily life was a lot different from what he did in the corporate world. Still, the measly three hundred dollar church salary he received each month was not enough. He needed to make a change.

Sister Margery Villa startled him when she came out the door. "Are you Okay pastor?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Randal answered and then smiled. I just need some fresh air.

"Are you sure?" she asked again.

Randal nodded.

Margery Villa was a tiny Filipina nurse who helped care for Randal when he spent twenty-five days in the hospital two years ago. She became close with Randal's wife Cheryl after speaking to her on an almost daily basis during that time. She just so happened to be looking for a church to attend and became more interested in them when she found out that they pastored a church. After witnessing Randal's near miraculous recovery from after nearly dying in the hospital, she wanted to attend his church.

"I'm fine sister," Randal said and then smiled. Margery was one of the kindest people he knew. He felt guilty for not telling her the truth. Margery returned a sweet smile and looked him up and down, not trusting what he had said, but unable to see anything physically wrong. "Take care of yourself pastor and watch what you eat," she said, waving her tiny finger. "You don't want to..."

"Are you working tonight?" Randal asked, knowing that would distract her. Margery looked down at her red nursing uniform. "Yes pastor, but I'll be at church tomorrow," she said with a smile.

"Oh, great then," Randal replied with a forced smile. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Okay, God bless pastor," she said before getting into her Ford Focus and driving away.

Members soon began exiting the church and scurrying to their cars. Some asked Randal if he was okay before leaving. He knew as long as he told them everything was fine, no one would probe further. Finally, his wife Cheryl exited the church and locked the door. Fooling his members was one thing, but Cheryl was another matter.

"Are you okay Randal?" Cheryl asked. She grasped his arm.

Randal smiled, tired of everyone asking and not wanting to answer.

"What did you eat today?" Cheryl asked. She felt guilty about working two shifts and not

leaving him at home without anything decent to eat.

"I'm fine Cheryl. Just thinking about my sermon." Randal said while fidgeting. "I'm going to stay for another hour and pray some more. I'll see you at home."

Cheryl looked at him, knowing that he was hiding something. She knew that he was getting bitterer about the church situation, the pressure from increasing bills and lower offerings coming into the church. She also knew that her continual prodding would only agitate him. "Maybe I'll stay and..."

"No, you go on home and get some rest. I know you're tired," Randal said.

Cheryl could see the frustration in his eyes. "Alright then, I'll see you at home, Randal," she said and then stepped into her brown Toyota Camry a few feet away.

Randal turned around and placed his key into the door lock but it would not open. He twisted, turned, and shook it unsuccessfully. He grabbed the doorknob and wiggled the key, gently then forcefully before letting out a tired sigh. This was the third time in as many weeks he had wrestled with the lock.

"You have to shake it, Cheryl yelled from inside the car.

He shot her an angry glare then turned around. "Just go ahead and leave Cheryl. I'll be okay."

Cheryl watched her weary husband through the passenger window. Randal waved, hoping that two nursing shifts at the hospital and one dry prayer meeting were enough to send her home. Tonight, he needed a solitary encounter with God.

Cheryl looked into the driver's side mirror and turned her attention to the passing traffic on Six Mile. "Be careful," she shouted half-heartedly through the closing passenger side window.

Randal waved once more before returning to his circular nemesis.

Cheryl was the last to pull off. She honked the horn and slipped into the passing traffic. Randal continued turning, twisting, and shaking the key to no avail. He glanced left, right, then at his watch. The church was not located in the best neighborhood in Detroit. Moreover, nine o'clock at night in the summer was not the best time to be fiddling with a lock. Randal caught a glimpse of someone walking towards him on his right towards the end of the block. He pushed the doorknob again and shook the key several more times.

"Come on," he muttered.

"Pastor?" a soft-spoken voice called from behind.

Randal jumped. *How in the world did he get here so fast*, Randal thought. He turned, with his hand

still on the knob, to see a tall, slender, middle-aged black man smiling. He appeared homeless, but was clean-shaven. He had on a plain, slightly soiled, orange T-shirt, olive green cargo pants, and dirty white tennis shoes.

"Can I ask you for a favor?" the man asked.

Randal smiled, preparing an excuse for why he did not have any money to give.

"Can you put this in the offering plate on Sunday?" the man asked.

Randal looked down to see a shiny new penny between the man's fingers. Randal chuckled.

The man had a blank look on his face.

Randal caught himself, realizing it was probably not a good idea to laugh in the man's face.

"Sure," Randal said and then took the penny. "Anything else?"

"Nothing else," the man said. "God bless." The man turned and continued walking down the street.

Randal looked at the penny, then back at the man. He shook his head. He put the penny in his back pocket and turned the key, hurrying to get inside before the man came back or any other strangers came by. Now, the key turned seamlessly to the right. Randal pushed the door forward, stepped inside, and locked the door behind him.

He sat on a folding chair closest to the door. He leaned over the back of the chair in front of him, clasped his hands, and closed his eyes. He took in the quiet, occasionally interrupted by the hum of passing cars. The lingering calm of the church just after prayer always soothed his troubled spirit. It was like breathing fresh air after a torrential thunderstorm. This time though, his spirit refused to calm. His mind turned to the increasingly low attendance on Sunday mornings and the meager offerings they had received for the past two weeks. Rent was due in two weeks and as usual, they were short. With only three hundred and thirty dollars in the church account, they were well short of the one thousand dollars they needed. To make matters worse, the water and electric bills were due as well. Randal was tired of being the lone person who seemed to care about the well-being of the church. He was beginning to crumble under these burdens. Why his members seemingly did not care that their church was on the brink of collapse he could not understand. Cheryl was picking up extra shifts at the hospital to help pay their home bills and make up the shortfall with the church bills. This frustrated Randal even more. *Why should we sacrifice so much and others so little? I'm going to have to close the church and get a job* Randal thought. He leaned back and sighed. Randal felt the penny in his back pocket. He took it out and examined it.

He stared at the 'In God we Trust' engraved on the front. It reminded him of the parable about the widow's mite. Randal's thoughts turned to the unknown man he had just encountered. This man took the time to stop by and give what little he had to the church. Tears welled in his eyes. Even though it was just a penny, the man had more faith than he now possessed. He leaned forward and clutched the chair in front of him.

"God...I...I'm..." Randal choked up. He wiped his eyes, leaned back, and took a deep breath. He looked at the penny and realized his meeting with the man could not have been by chance. He was holding tomorrow's sermon.

"Is that everybody," Randal asked looking across the wooden pulpit early Sunday morning. He scanned for any stragglers with an offering. He saw the few envelopes and coins in the silver plate Sister Nettie Nelson held and hoped for more. He perused the thirty five-member congregation once more. Wary members did their best to avoid eye contact and prayed for him to move on.

"Amen, let us bless this offering," Randal said. "Father we thank you-" he said and then paused. He reached inside of his suit jacket and produced the penny the man had given him last night. He stepped down from the platform and dropped it in the plate. The sound of the solitary coin rolling around the plate caused Sister Nettie and several women in the second row to snicker. Cheryl, who was seated in the second row, looked up and cast a wary eye on the sisters. She looked at Randal briefly, wondering what he was trying to prove before bowing her head to pray.

After the service, Sister Nettie handed Randal a plain, white #10 envelope containing the Sunday offering.

"How did we do," he asked.

"Two hundred twenty," she mumbled. "And thirty cents in pennies," she added sarcastically.

As he had done many times, Randal covered his disappointment with a smile. He thanked Nettie, tucked the envelope into his jacket, and walked away. For the first time in weeks, he was optimistic even though he had received disappointing news. He had no reason to explain why, but somehow he felt things were going to get better.

Randal arrived at church for prayer on Saturday evening just before seven p.m.. He opened the

door and stepped inside to see a mess of envelopes lying on the floor. He picked up each envelope, quickly scanning and skipping over the bills and junk mail. A hand written letter caught his attention. It was from Pastor Glen Huntley of Hope United Fellowship, a large non-denominational church in Troy, Michigan. Curious, Randal opened the envelope. A check fell out. After picking it up, his mouth fell wide open. The amount of the check was one thousand dollars! He turned quickly and flicked the light switch on. The letter read:

Greetings in the name of the Lord Pastor Coleman,

You don't know me personally, but I have a brief testimony to share with you. This past Sunday morning during our Bible class, an unknown man asked me to put a penny in the offering plate for him. While I thought his request strange, I obliged since stranger things have happened. Later that evening, our secretary informed me that a check for twenty thousand dollars had been given in the morning offering. Pastor Coleman, unbeknownst to many, our church needed nineteen thousand dollars to avoid foreclosure proceedings next month. Just before our evening service started, I prayed to thank God for the wonderful miracle he had just performed. The Lord spoke to my heart during that prayer and told me to send your church this check for the remaining one thousand dollars. I hope this is in some way an answer to your prayers.

God Bless

Pastor Glen Huntley

Randal fell into the chair next to the back door. He looked at the check again to make sure that it was real. Cheryl walked into the church.

"What's that?" Cheryl asked.

Randal handed her the check. Cheryl's mouth fell open after she saw the amount.

"Randal, I feel like something's starting to happen here," Cheryl said.

On Sunday, Randal could hardly contain himself. He preached as if a fire had been lit in his spirit. He hymned, hawed, swayed, and stomped the platform while preaching. For some strange reason, the congregation seemed to be just as excited as he was. Randal chalked it up to his preaching.

"Give and it shall be given unto you," Randal roared.

"Amen," Sister Nettie shouted from the first row.

"Pressed down," Randal continued.

"Preach it Pastor," Mother Watson yelled, shaking her head from side to side.

"And shaken together..." Randal said as Brother Tony stood up in the back and cut a step.

"Shall men..." Randal said and then paused. He took two steps back before continuing. "...Give into your bosom!" he sang into the microphone as the organ rang out in tune with him. The entire church was on their feet, clapping, shouting Amen and waving their hands. Randal stomped the floor again. "Can I get an Amen church?"

"Amen," the members shouted back.

"Can I get a witness somebody?" Randal shouted.

"Amen," the members shouted again, even louder. Someone stepped into the aisle and started dancing.

Cheryl stepped out of the tiny back office and started frantically flashing a white paper, trying to get Randal's attention. Annoyed, he glanced at the sign briefly before starting up again. Then, the large black letters on the paper flashed before his eyes, \$25,000!!! Cheryl was trying to tell him how much the Sunday offering was. Speechless, Randal stood before the emotionally charged crowd trying to figure out what to say next.

He stared into the congregation. Some members were still standing and swaying while others rocked from side to side in their seats.

Randal swallowed, and then took a deep breath. Unsure of what was going on, Brother Isaiah, the organ player continued playing softly as Randal took a few more moments to calm himself before speaking.

"Church, two Wednesdays ago...a...a man approached me outside and asked me to," Randal paused and then laughed. "He asked me to put a penny into the offering plate last Sunday. I didn't understand why, but I did it. Believe it or not, last night, before prayer, I found that another church had mailed us a check for one thousand dollars."

Brother Isaiah stopped playing and looked up, his mouth wide open. Randal expected a tide of praise and Amen's, but the congregation remained quiet. Undaunted, Randal continued. "During prayer last night, I thanked God and asked him to bless our church even more. He did. My wife just told me that today's offering is twenty five thousand dollars."

Cheryl lowered the sign and placed a shaking hand over her mouth.

Sister Dottie Anderson looked around the congregation and then stood up. "Pastor, last Sunday morning, a homeless man approached me outside as I walked from my car to the church. He gave me a penny and asked me to put it in the offering plate. On Thursday," her lips began to quiver. "I got a check in the mail from a lawyer in Georgia saying that my aunt Tessie had passed away and left me ten thousand dollars. I gave two thousand dollars today."

Randal could not believe what he heard. He looked at the congregation's shocked faces and had a nagging suspicion. He decided to pose a question to his members. "Raise your hand if you received a large financial blessing this week after putting a penny in the offering plate given to you by a strange man"

One by one, each adult in the church held up their hand. Randal looked at Cheryl, who slowly rose her hand.

Randal was dumbfounded.

"Pastor?" Brother Isaiah said, with his hand still raised, we need to tell somebody about this."