

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 99 – Claude Alexander, Jr. – The Park Church

Seeing Fully What We Now See Only In Part

And now a personal word,

The morning I met Bishop Alexander for this conversation, and life and death events in our lives blurred together.

I met Bishop Alexander on a Saturday morning outside The Park Expo and Conference Center near Independence Boulevard in Charlotte. I had made left and right turns trying to find my way into a massive, empty parking lot. It was a blistering-hot day. I walked up to the five-story expo center, and every door I checked was locked. There was no one in sight. I called Bishop Alexander on his cellphone, and he assured me that he was just around the corner.

Bishop Alexander is a tall, lean fellow with a gracious manner and a gravelly, calming voice. He has the gait of a confident man. He walked me into the expo center, a cavernous space that was once the Charlotte Merchandise Mart and is now a multifaceted religious and business enterprise zone. Signs declaring the mission of the church were posted throughout the complex. Bishop Alexander guided me to his fifth-floor office where a large, expressive painting of Jesus overlooked our conference table. I set up my microphones, and our conversation began about the history of The Park, the legacy of racism in America, charges of misogyny and homophobia in the church, an opportunity for trade and commerce with Africa, and his call to ministry. Then the conversation became quiet and personal.

Bishop Alexander shared a crisis of faith that followed the death of his brother. His voice became measured. He bowed his head. He wiped away tears. His brother died from cancer at the age of thirty-nine. Bishop Alexander said how tender he felt. He talked about loss and anger. Unspoken was that God had forsaken him.

I listened in silence. There is something sacred when a person shares themselves honestly. The space between is charged.

Bishop Alexander went on to share what he wanted people to know: that life with God is one in which questions may not be answered, but one comes to know who God is, and God's presence becomes sufficient in mystery. He added that the Resurrection provides hope that all of the disjointed things of life will find their resolution in a day when we

will see fully what we now see only in part. Trust in God's love creates space for intimacy.

Bishop Alexander's memories about his brother brought up feelings I have about my dad. My dad was forty-six years old when I was born. We were generations apart. He was Brazilian and I was American. My brother and sisters and I experienced a lot of drama at home. We moved constantly and grew up in a house where my parents often clashed.

I mention all this because there were years when my dad and I were estranged. We did not talk to each other for months. In one instance, two years went by before we spoke. Then I would knock on the door of my parents' apartment, and he would open it, and I would kiss my dad on his cheek in the Brazilian way. That kiss would forgive whatever had happened, and we would go on and eat dinner at the table and watch heavy-weight boxing and *Meet the Press*.

In the spring of 1992, when I was thirty years old and my dad was seventy-six, I began tape-recording conversations with my dad. My father was a natural storyteller. He told the same stories over and over again, but somehow each time they felt fresh and poignant and funny. I wanted to record his Brazilian-accented voice and preserve the memory of his extraordinary life. Over the next three months, we talked at his apartment or mine in Miami. I pushed down the cassette recorder button and asked him questions. We recorded twelve hours of conversation about the low points and high points and turning points of our family. I transcribed every word, typing in the same hunt-and-peck way my dad did on his old Corolla typewriter.

I bound the transcription of my conversation with my dad into three volumes and gave a set to my brother and sisters and my mom. I wrote this foreword:

This is the story of one man's life. It is offered as much to reveal him as it is to reveal us. It is an inventory of impressions on a shelf, of photographs of a mind. Moments are fleeting, elusive to capture, but moments shared are the stuff of lives. Here is a reflection, and a shared memory of a life, and of us.

At the end of volume III, I included a personal letter my dad wrote to his children, sharing his insights about each of us and his love for all of us. It is the most tender letter one can imagine.

Seven years later I moved to Charlotte. On August 20, 1999, my sister called me with news that my mom and dad had been in a terrible car accident. They were taken to the hospital in critical condition. My dad was eighty-two years old but had survived every health scare. No one in my family had died. I was sure he would make it, and I did not

travel to Florida, focusing on my new start-up business instead. I spoke with my dad on the phone, and he told me from his hospital bed that he would be fine. In the early dawn of September 10, the phone rang at my home. I could sense in the tone of the rings that I was about to hear news I did not want to hear. My sister was on the line. She told me our dad had died. I remember crying out this guttural cry.

I spoke at my dad's service. My voice broke several times as I read out loud the letter he had written to his children. My father wrote:

A father with children like mine is very, very rich indeed. Thank you, O Lord, for anointing me with so much love. My children have been an endless source of inspiration, motivation, and strength to face the tribulations and trials of my life. And despite my humble position, I am the victor. I realize I could have been a better father; I could have provided my children with more security and counseling to improve their lot. In a way I am satisfied, for they are well. They are exactly who I felt they would become and have fulfilled the message each of them brought into this world.

That was my dad. And I miss him.

This podcast marks the twentieth anniversary year of when my dad died. I don't know where the impulse to do things comes from. I don't know if we will see fully what we now see only in part.

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