

MORRIS CHAPMAN

I KNOW
the PLANS

THE STORIES, SONGS,
AND SEASONS
OF A BLESSED LIFE

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MORRIS CHAPMAN

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CHAPTER 2

Out of Camden

I was the first member of the Chapman family to come to Christ. My spiritual hunger drove me to a Baptist Church at a very early age. But the music was so mournful that my soul could not find a connecting point.

In the mid-1940s, around the end of World War Two, Church of God in Christ (COGIC) Elder Harry Brown “preached out” a church. In those days, an Elder could go to an area that had no established COGIC congregation. He would explore the wooded countryside, find roadways and available electric power, and stake out a prospective location for a Brush Arbor meeting. The brothers of the community would build some kind of structure and makeshift pulpit and pews. Then the Elder would start a revival meeting, literally preaching a church into existence.

So, on top of a hill near our house, Elder Brown cut trees and formed an open-air meeting place. Vertical posts formed the weight-bearing pillars for the roof, which was comprised of hay or branches. As such, they offered some shelter from the

rain, but not from the heat or cold. Brush Arbor meeting places were very common in African-American churches, especially in the South, where moderate weather permitted people to gather almost year-round without walls or heating or air-conditioning.

He literally carved a church out of the ground. Later, Elder Brown made bricks for a more permanent and comfortable building on top of another hill. That hill was actually a Civil War battleground. And that was somewhat prophetic. It was a place of war between the enemy of our souls and our Lord Jesus.

I and other boys in the neighborhood helped him; we poured the mixture of sand and concrete into molds. Elder Brown, one strong man, was the center of gravity for the church. He worked and willed and prayed that place into existence. It almost killed him. Literally. During the construction he fasted till he almost died.

The permanent two-story structure was built into the side of the hill. A dining hall and kitchen formed the lower level. Naturally, the upper floor was the meeting place. It would hold 500 people, but it usually drew 50 to 60 people for meetings. And that was the birth of East Camden Church of God in Christ.

A particular style of music drew me to the Church Of God In Christ. I learned to play the piano in that place. I've never had a lesson and I cannot read music. But something came over me. At first, I just made noise. But I remember *sounds* coming to my spirit. I could hear Heaven's chords; I heard them with my heart and I kept searching the keys till I found those chords! For me, playing the piano was my escape from the things of this earth, but it also lifted me up into the chamber of the Lord.

Since the church was built into the hillside, a small window

was almost level with the ground. Having discovered a way to leave the inside latch open, I would flip the window up, crawl through into the basement and then climb the stairs into the sanctuary. I would stay there for hours; when daylight faded, I would search for a melody in the darkness. I will never forget the moment I played my first C-chord. It sounded like music from Heaven. Although playing the piano was my escape from painful childhood memories, I also touched the Lord in those times. I learned how to enter His Presence.

Over time, a legend grew that a ghost was playing piano in the church. But that was quickly debunked when my brother James and a few friends staked the place out to see if one would emerge from the building when the music stopped. One night they saw me coming out the side window; James said, “Aw, that’s not a ghost; that’s my brother Morris.”



Over the years, most of the Chapman family came to the Lord in that place. I guess the reason that building is so precious in our memories is that it was our Ebenezer, our memorial of stones, marking the victory of Christ in the Chapman family.

That victory was graphically formed in us through the death – and resurrection – of our mother. In 1953, Elder Brown was officiating Elder Gilmore's Annual Pastor's Appreciation in Chidester, about 16 miles northwest of Camden. Elder Brown had taken Mom, Ethel, and me to the service. When we got back to Camden, Mom passed out from inhaling exhaust fumes, and fell into a deep coma.

She could not be awakened, and Elder Brown, Dad, and our next-door neighbor, Frank Davis, carried her into the house. Dr. Ira Clark came to the house and examined her. He was

deeply concerned and was about to declare her dead when Elder Brown began to pray.

“Lord, this lady was traveling with us to do your services. If I have found favor in your sight, please let life come back into her now.” And Mom moved. She came back to life; she breathed out a deep sigh!

The Dragon and the Baby

I was fearful as a child. I always knew that God had called me and that He had a purpose for Morris Chapman. God’s call and the grip of destiny were always full in my heart. Yet, I was afraid...of water, trains, high and narrow bridges, sin, and other things. It was like I felt the need to protect my destiny. So all those things seemed like threats.

For example, in 1953 I went to work for Mr. B. J. Biggers and Mr. Jeff Reynolds at Camden’s Duck Inn Café. One night my left hand got caught in a cube steak machine. I was cleaning it and probably didn’t unplug it (I don’t remember the details; it all happened so quickly). But I do know that they had to take the machine apart to extract my hand and then Mr. B.J. rushed me to the hospital. He stayed there with me till I was dismissed. Then he drove me home, lifted me from the car, and carried me in his arms to my father. He said, “Arthur, I am so sorry; we should have taken better care of your son.” Dad thanked him. Of course, no one thought of a lawsuit.³

The doctor warned my parents that my hand might not return to normal. But one night, during worship service in our

³ Mr. Biggers and I became very close friends over the years. I was always welcome in their home. Since I moved away, I have returned to Camden and stayed as a guest in their home.

church, my hand just opened up supernaturally in His Presence and began to heal.

Later, I regained full use of the instrument He gave me! So often, over the years, when I've seen my hand on the keyboard during a time of worship or a concert at Brooklyn Tabernacle, Saddleback Church, or a thousand other places, I've remembered that I almost lost one of the primary "instruments" the Lord gave me – my left hand. I was 15, working at what was actually a very dangerous job. That was before OSHA.



The Bible says there was a war in Heaven, a war between Michael and "the dragon" – the Devil, the Ancient Serpent, the Deceiver. When the Christ is born of a woman, the dragon tries to devour the Child (Revelation 12). And when Michael won the war, the dragon was thrown down to the earth. And so was the war. On earth, the dragon tried to devour the Baby when Herod ordered all the male infants (up to 24 months old) killed. And He still tries to devour God's offspring.

That pattern seems to attend anything that God births. The enemy always lurks nearby, waiting to destroy what God created and called.

For me and the whole Chapman family, the racism of the South was part of the dragon. And he did devour many black children and their promise and destiny. Even as a child, I could see other "dragons" in our community – poverty, illness, predatory males, and other *devourers*.

All of that may be why I was very industrious as a child. Art remembers me wearing a business hat when I was a child. I had ideas; I wanted to accomplish things. I wanted to get a job, to

press beyond the dragon. All of that was probably the stirring of God's call on my life. I did not want to blow it.

Arthur Chapman, Sr.

The dragon and the baby is also the story of my father. My grandmother, Fannie Daugherty, got pregnant when she was 15. Our family still does not know the circumstances; the identity of my father's father remains a mystery. But we do know that Fannie Daugherty died a short time after giving birth to my father. We think she was 16.

A family friend wrapped my father in a blanket, placed him in a box, and left him by the side of a walking trail (many black people in the South did not have cars; they walked trails all over the communities and countryside). The friend knew that someone would come by and have mercy on the baby. But I think about my father as that baby. Did he get hungry? Did he cry? How long did he lie there? We don't know. But that "seed" that became my siblings and me was totally alone. Or, was he? Was Moses ever "alone" when he was the baby in the basket on the Nile? When the mother of Moses gave her son to the river, she gave him to the larger provision and care of the Lord of the universe. The whole family story, the whole kindness-of-God-to-me, the whole "I know the plans..." was in the baby in the box. So vulnerable to the dragon. Yet, he was nestled in the hand of God.

After a while, a kind lady did come along. She took the baby to a woman named Miranda Chatman, or Chapman. She and her husband agreed to take the baby. They gave him their family name and raised Dad as their son.

His birth certificate shows his name as "Arthur Chatman."

And his and Mom's marriage license also showed "Chatman." He changed it to Chapman later on.

At the end of his life, on his deathbed, Dad said to my sister Rosene, "If there is anything in the world I regret, it is that I did not know who my real father was." Many young men want to know their father. Or, know more about the man. Every day of my life, I realize there is so much I do not know about Arthur Chapman. I wish I could sit with him today and just talk. But I do know my heavenly Father. And He knows me. He also knows the plans He has for me.

Crossing Over

Most people regard "Bethlehem Morning" as my "signature" song. The song contains a line: "For the Child that was born there has come to set us free." I believe God plants a yearning for freedom in everyone.

In the Camden of the 1950s, black people could make reasonable wages if they worked for the International Paper Company, Grapette Bottling Company, Camark Pottery, and a few other "regular" jobs. But, too many lacked the education and skill to qualify for those jobs. So, many blacks made about a dollar a day. And they had to work very hard to even make that.

Of course, that was discouraging and painful. Art's story of Dad trying to buy groceries on credit was multiplied thousands of times across Arkansas and other Southern states. And our father made more than most black people in, and beyond, Camden.

Although Camden was a nice town, we could not be free there. That yearning for freedom stirred our hearts.

Sometime in the 1950s, a friend of Ethel's moved to Las Vegas and got a good job. In July of 1956, the Lord put it in Ethel's mind to relocate to Las Vegas. At 19 years old, Ethel became the Chapman family's "Moses." When her friend Willie Mae Jones came to Camden for a visit, Ethel went home with her. When she arrived in Las Vegas, the Silver Slipper Hotel hired her. Later, she got a better job at The Flamingo Hotel.

Ethel made good money at The Flamingo – about eight times as much as she could make in Camden. Naturally, she wanted her whole family to move to Las Vegas. In April of 1957, when I was 19, Ethel sent me a bus ticket. I boarded a bus in Camden and moved to Las Vegas. I had one brown Samsonite suitcase, \$10 in cash, and the clothes on my back.

Our sister Florence was the next Chapman to move to Las Vegas. And she got a loan from her credit union and bought a 1955 Buick. That just would not have been possible in Camden.

Bishop C. C. Cox, our pastor, prophesied that Las Vegas would be the Promised Land for our family. He said, "Ethel, go back to Arkansas and get your family."

So Ethel and Florence drove the Buick back to Camden and loaded Mom and all the children and brought everyone (except Dad) back to Las Vegas. Eleven people in the car and trailer! The trailer had a canvas top, all our family belongings, and two cane chairs at the back. They drove 1,500 miles like that. We had crossed over.

As strange as it may seem today, none of us had any concept of Las Vegas as "sin city" or even a gambling center. It was a place where black friends had found a good living. We were looking for that.



Dad stayed in Camden. He had some plumbing jobs, and he needed to sell the house and three lots he had acquired over the years. But, in fact, he was afraid to leave Camden. It was something new; he was afraid of change.

A few months after bringing most of the family to Las Vegas, Ethel returned to Camden to bring the last Chapman, our father. His reluctance to move was the main reason she was there for three weeks. In fact, she almost lost her job because Dad was so stubborn. Finally, Ethel fasted and prayed. And she and the Lord finally convinced Dad to leave a familiar place for a land he had never seen. They packed up the remaining possessions in Dad's old pickup and left Camden. The pickup's tires were bald and they had almost no money; they drank cokes and ate crackers for the whole journey.

When they arrived in Las Vegas, the whole Chapman family had crossed "the Continental Divide" of our family history. We left the old way behind and embraced a new future. Las Vegas was our "promised land." But we would soon learn that the same evil that lurked in Camden, Arkansas, also lived in Las Vegas.