

STORY BY RALPH CIPRIANO

DRAWN TO

AMONG PASTOR BENNY HINN'S FAITHFUL,
I WAS A SKEPTICAL PILGRIM.

THE SPIRIT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY J. KYLE KEENER

*And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God,
That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your young men shall see visions,
Your old men shall dream dreams.*

Acts 2:17

ANNA RILEY WAS WATCHING TV one afternoon when she heard the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The South Philly mom had just flipped on the last few minutes of *This Is Your Day*, hosted by charismatic faith healer Benny Hinn. Pastor Benny is an olive-skinned elf who wears Italian designer suits and sports a spectacular, metallic-looking hairdo. He has a thick Middle Eastern accent, and when he gets excited, he shouts things like, "Let's give the Lahhrddddd a great hand of praise!"

"Who is this weirdo?" Anna said.

"You'll watch him tomorrow," said the Holy Spirit. "Anna, I'm going to use him. The Holy Spirit's going to teach you the things you need to know through the pastor on TV."

"Lord, I don't know what time he comes on," Anna said.

"He comes on at 2:30."

The next day, Anna sat cross-legged on her living room carpet, inches from her TV with the ceramic Nativity scene on top. When Pastor Benny appeared on the screen, Anna felt warm energy flow through her 27-inch Sony. She began to tremble and cry.

"I know that this man is a man of God, and that it's the Holy Spirit working through him," she said. "I just know it."

And that's how two years ago Anna met the pastor who would inspire her, her husband, and her son to take a trip to Israel last spring, the family's first vacation in 27 years.

The "Benny Hinn Miracle Crusade Holy Land 1993" tour cost only \$2,030-per person for "10 glorious, life-changing days" in the land of the Bible, including air fare, hotels, buses, meals and tips.

A foreign adventure was out of character for Anna DeBartolo Johnson

Riley, who lives at 10th and Oregon, four blocks from where she grew up 45 years ago, in the 2600 block of Juniper. Anna'd never left South Philly before, had never even gotten on an airplane. To her, the Middle East was a place on the newscasts where people got kidnapped or blown up by car bombs.

But Anna was convinced that God wanted her to follow Pastor Benny to Jerusalem. And nothing would change her mind.

*And these signs will follow those who believe:
In My name they will cast out demons; they will
speak with new tongues . . .*

*they will lay hands on the sick, and they will
recover.*

Mark 16:17-18

PASTOR BENNY HINN WAVES hello to a plane load of pilgrims. He doesn't look like a famous televangelist today. The 5-foot-7, 150-pound preacher is decked out like a dude rancher, in a denim shirt, silver belt, faded Levi's, and blue lizardskin cowboy boots. A thick gold ring on his hand blazes with diamonds. And his silver hair helmet is sprayed to perfection.

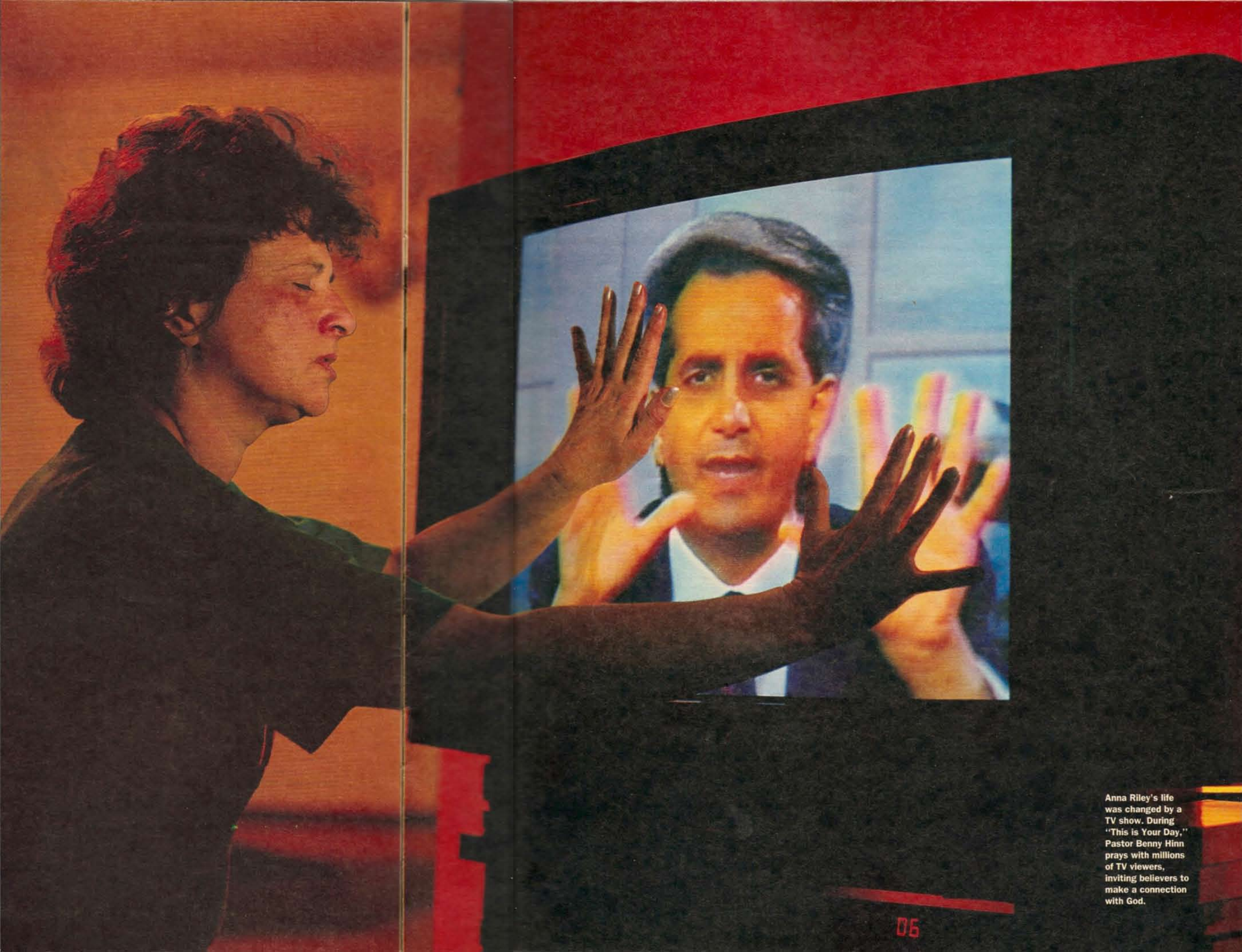
The secret of the Hinn do is a super-long, glossy shock that sprouts above the pastor's right ear. It torques straight up, cascades over one temple, and flattens into a lopsided lid that rivals Gumby's.

"I do it myself," he says proudly.

Pastor Benny cradles the public address phone under his chin. And he's singing, a cappella, "How Great Thou Art." His accent seems even heavier in song. To me, a skeptic with a notepad, he brings back memories of Ricky Ricardo and Babba-loo. But hey, look around. As far as the passengers are concerned, Pastor Benny sings like Neil Diamond. More than 400 wholesome-looking Christians are smiling and singing along as they fly over the Atlantic.

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J. KYLE KEENER is an Inquirer staff photographer.



Anna Riley's life was changed by a TV show. During "This is Your Day," Pastor Benny Hinn prays with millions of TV viewers, inviting believers to make a connection with God.

Hinn

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Maybe I'm not supposed to get it. After all, I'm an outsider who shuns organized religion. And I have my doubts about wealthy TV faith healers. I also have a problem with crowds. To me, spirituality is private, not something you share with 400 strangers.

So I'm ragging along on Pastor Benny's junket strictly as a faithful observer. It's my job to record this event impartially. But I

can't help wondering whether Pastor Benny is for real.

I seem alone in my skepticism. Everybody else looks tickled just to be this close to Pastor Benny. And who can blame them? The preacher the Orlando Sentinel, his hometown paper, calls "The Miracle Man" is just about the hottest TV evangelist in the country right now, and at age 40, the second biggest draw on the church circuit, after Billy Graham.

Pastor Benny's the head of his own \$15 million-a-year religious conglomerate. He's got his own cable TV show, beamed to millions of households a day in America, Israel, Europe and South and Central America. He's got his own nondenominational church, the Orlando

(Fla.) Christian Center, where on Sundays he packs more than 7,000 people into three overflow services. Once a month, he takes to the road to cities across America. In February, he drew 45,000 to the Civic Center in Philadelphia in three services over two days. And both nights, thousands were turned away.

Pastor Benny is a best-selling author; he also has fans in Hollywood. Comedian Steve Martin stole some of Pastor Benny's showmanship for his movie *Leap of Faith* about faith healer Jonas Nightengale. "He's a great performer," Martin gushed about Pastor Benny on the *Today* show.

And we're about to see why, because on the plane it's show time. Pastor Benny feels the anointing coming on, and just like that, the Holy Spirit is flying El Al Airlines.

"Someone to the right of me, if you'll move your shoulder, you'll find the pain is leaving," Pastor Benny shouts. "There are people getting healed right now."

An elderly woman in front of me

clutches her neck and sits up. "What has happened here?" Pastor Benny asks. "A ruptured disc in my neck," says Frances Joyce Rogers of Jacksonville, Fla. "The pain is gone."

"Move your neck," the pastor commands. "It doesn't hurt?" She nods. He grasps her chin. And she falls backward in a gentle swoon, overcome by the Holy Spirit.

"The Lord is healing people right in the plane," Pastor Benny tells his fellow Christians. "Can you believe it?"

Well, my chapped lips aren't feeling any better. But Rogers, back in her seat, is still trembling. "I've never been slain in the Spirit before," she says. "I felt it go down my spine. . . . It's like a faint."

She doesn't look like a professional actress, I decide. Too unvarnished.

"What has happened here?" Pastor Benny asks Cecil R. Johnson, 69, a retired railroad employee from St. Louis. Johnson says he can hear well for the first time in 10 years.

"The Lord healed that man's ears," Pastor Benny says, positioning himself behind the man. "Can you hear me now?"

Johnson smiles and nods. The pastor moves to another spot. "Can you hear me now?" he whispers. Johnson nods excitedly. "Now that's what I call a quick healing service," Pastor Benny says, playing to the crowd. Then, in a flourish he touches Johnson, who topples over, drunk with the Spirit.

Misty Mack is an angelic-looking 14-year-old girl with pale skin and cascading, light-brown hair. She has a distracted look in her eyes as if she's tuned to an inner voice. But on this plane, that isn't unusual.

Misty is whispering to her parents. "Something is happening to her heart," her mother, Effie Mack, tells Pastor Benny. "She just told her Daddy she could feel her heart getting stronger while you were praying."

"Praise Jesus, 30,000 feet up in the air!" the pastor says. "Not many can say I got a healing while flying 30,000 feet up in the air!"

The power ebbs. "People, come on, give the Lord a great hand of praise for all he's done."

What Pastor Benny's done is warm up his fans for what he has promised them, "miracles" in the land of the Bible. I'm wondering: Were these people really sick? Are they really well?

Meet Effie Mack, 57, a gray-haired accountant, and her husband, Clinton, 60, a retired, white-haired truck driver. He's wearing an LSU baseball cap and a "God's

Gym" T-shirt that's stretched over an ample belly. The shirt shows Samson on a holy rampage, tearing down the temple.

In plain language, the Macks tell an astounding story.

Misty, who is adopted, was born with a head swollen bigger than her body. Spina bifida made her "feet hang like wet spaghetti," Effie says.

"Vegetable, no chance of survival," a neurosurgeon wrote on Misty's medical folder, Effie remembers, and she's brought along medical records and baby pictures to back up her story. Effie went to a Benny Hinn crusade, in 1979, when Misty was 11 months old. She carried the infant on a pillow in the healing line. Pastor Benny parted the crowd. "Stand there, little mama," he said, and the power began to flow.

"It was like bolts of electricity," Effie recalls. "It would hit her in the trunk of her body, and her body would just sort of jerk, and almost come off the pillow. Then it would hit her in that big head and that head almost came off the pillow. It hit her in the arms, and her arms would fly out."

The next day, Misty's head began to shrink, Effie says. And Misty was able to push with her legs for the first time.

Over a period of months, Misty's head contracted 7 7/8 inches. She's now a sixth-grader in Germantown, Tenn., who gets "excellents" in music and art. And an aspiring gospel singer who will sing "Somebody Touched Me" at one of Pastor Benny's Holy Land services.

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At a sunrise service by the Sea of Galilee, pilgrims traveling on the Holy Land tour praise the Lord.



Misty's story leaves me dazed. Could it possibly be true?

Pastor Benny is making the rounds, autographing Bibles and his own bestsellers. And posing for pictures. "Take your time, honey," he tells one woman fumbling with her Instamatic. The flash doesn't go off. "Go ahead, take another one."

The line is long, and people are jostling to get close to Pastor Benny. Too many people. So Anna, sitting in the last row, keeps praying — until someone places a hand on her shoulder, and she nearly jumps. It's Pastor Benny.

He looks younger in person, she decides. And there's something else, a kindness in his face. "I just love the Jesus I see in him," she says.

"Hel-lo," Pastor Benny says, as he leans over and reads nametags. Anna is on the aisle, Nelson is in the middle, and Michael, 19, is by the window.

"Mother, father, son?" the pastor asks. The three Rileys nod. Anna pulls out Pastor Benny's *Lord, I Need A Miracle*, and asks, "Just sign my book." He obliges, then poses with his arms around Nelson and Anna. Michael snaps the picture. The men are smiling; Anna looks like she's in shock. The pastor heads back to first class.

The purser announces that *Ben Hur*, starring Charlton Heston, is ready to roll. Anna resumes praising God, but Nelson reaches for the headphones. What better time for a 3½ hour biblical epic, than on an 11-hour flight to the Holy Land?

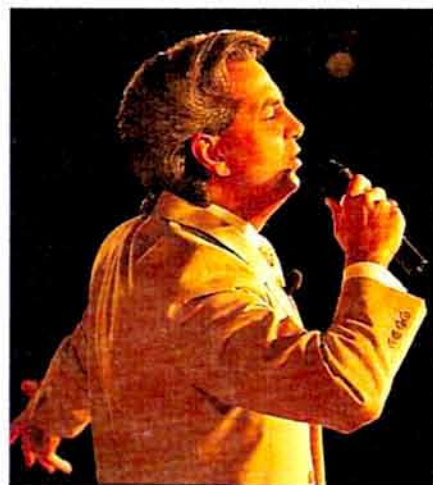
Pastor Benny takes a seat by a sunny courtyard. He has thin, drawn shoulders and smells of Giorgio Armani. "Is my wife coming down?" he asks. She needs a few more minutes.

Pastor Benny has an orange juice at his side, and a fistful of vitamins in his hand. There's a multipurpose vitamin, some extra C and E, and some enzymes to help with his digestion.

"I'd like an omelet, white only," he tells a bodyguard.

The vegetables are not to his liking. "I want real cucumbers, real tomatoes," he says, sending the bodyguard off to try again.

The apostles are going over plane and bus schedules. Five jumbo jets are flying in from New York, Orlando and Toronto,



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And they will hear my voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

John 10:16.

IT'S 8 O'CLOCK ON A BREEZY morning in Jerusalem, the ancient stone city that in the sunshine turns gold. Out in front of the Jerusalem Hyatt, Pastor Benny strolls along a driveway stacked with idling buses.

The pastor, in designer shades, white leather coat and denim duds, hops on Bus 27. It's packed with 47 jet-lagged pilgrims, bucking up for their first day of Holy Land sight-seeing.

"Good morning to all you dear people. How are you?" Pastor Benny says. Everybody perks up. "God bless you, and I'll see you tonight at 9 o'clock for a wonderful healing service."

The buses roar off. Pastor Benny strides into the hotel dining room with a "Good morning, everyone," and works the room.

He doesn't travel alone. Pastor Benny has his Orlando Apostles: a head administrator, a travel consultant, two pumped-up bodyguards, a gospel singer, a silver-haired baritone, two of Pastor Benny's brothers, three clean-cut assistant pastors, a TV producer, three cameramen, a sound technician and a keyboard player. Portable phones ring all through breakfast; Pastor Benny's men answer in Hebrew and Arabic.

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Suzanne and Pastor Benny were married in 1979, the same year Pastor Benny moved to Orlando. The Hinnns have four children: Jessica, 11; Natasha, 9; Joshua, 2; and Eleasha, nine months. And Suzanne wants Dad to become a regular at family birthday parties.

"So many women are jealous," she says. "They wouldn't last a week."

The pastor stops by, kisses his wife goodbye, and jumps in a gray GMC van. He's got the energy of a teenager on junk food. He's off to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus wandered in agony and where Benny Hinn is swarmed as if he's the Pope or Michael Jackson. He's got his shades on.

"Praise Jesus," the pilgrims shout, and with their hugs they almost knock him over. He grabs the back of his head. "Honey," he tells one affectionate woman, "don't pick with the back of my hair."

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asks. The crowd drowns him with cheers.

That's it for small talk. Standing with his followers among ancient, gnarled olive trees, Pastor Benny takes control. He opens his battered, leather-bound New King James Version Bible, and flips through limp, taped-together pages color-coded with seven Magic Markers. The crowd grows silent.

"O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will," Pastor Benny says, quoting Jesus in Matthew 26:39.

"Let us pray together," he says. "Lord, we thank you for these wonderful people. I just pray for them that God's anointing will be so real to them."

The pastor leads the crowd in song, and poses for pictures. "It's my pleasure, sweetheart," he tells one admirer.

The bus captains are yelling it's time to head back. "This was a bonus," one smiling woman says as she hustles by.

Pastor Benny's van beats the buses out of the parking lot. He's headed for Ben Gurion International Airport. If Yair, his Israeli driver, can hurry, Pastor Benny will catch the last paneload of pilgrims flying in from New York.

For she said to herself, "If only I touch His garment, I shall be made well."

But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her, He said, "Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well."

Matthew 9:21-22

BUS NO. 27 BARRELS DOWN THE Jerusalem-Jericho highway, toward the Judean Desert.

"We have a long, narrow country the size of the state of New Jersey," says Israeli tour guide Avishai Brace, a former tomato farmer.

In the back of the bus, the Rileys are pumped. Today, the folks from 10th and Oregon are headed for the ancient ruins of Masada, the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found and, finally, a dip in the Dead Sea.

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Looking out the window, the Rileys see young Israeli soldiers in khaki uniforms hitch-hiking with M-16s on their backs. The bus passes the burial place of Samuel the prophet. Soon, the Rileys are gazing at golden limestone hills rolling by under a hazy sky, herds of grazing sheep and goats, and Bedouins in ancient headdresses standing outside long, billowing tents.

"I didn't think people still lived like that," Anna says.

The bus descends toward the lowest spot on earth, the Dead Sea, some 1,292 feet below sea level. On the way, the Rileys are amazed by the greenery they see: vineyards, fields of tomatoes and groves of banana trees. And the Bible-toting pilgrims recall the words of the prophet Isaiah:

The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them,

And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose (Isaiah 35:1)

The bus pulls over so the tourists can see the ancient caves where the scrolls were found. Nelson and Michael rush off on the soft, flaky desert soil. And Anna talks about how a dream changed her life.

Two years ago, she says, she fell asleep and felt herself being drawn toward a cold presence that she realized was the devil. As she tells the story, her eyes grow red and teary, and she shivers from head to toe. She cried out for help, she says, and she saw a bright light and felt tremendous warmth. She woke up trembling and talking to Jesus. She became a born-again Christian, and her faith has given her peace of mind.

"Look, if I die, if anything happens, I'm going home," she says. "I used to have a shingle outside my door that said, 'Bring your problems to Anna, and she'll worry about it for you.' Now, I still have problems, but I don't worry about them anymore. I just pray."

She grabs handfuls of rocks and sand, and pours them into plastic sandwich bags. "I promised some of the people at church I would bring them samples of wherever we went."

Anna is now a "partner," one of 5,000, in Pastor Benny's crusades, contributing \$30 a month. When Pastor Benny came to Philadelphia in February, Anna got reserved tickets for the first healing service. That morning, Anna had to roll her body out of bed because her back hurt so much from a car accident several years ago. The pain also kept her up many nights. But in a few seconds at the Civic Center, the agony disappeared.

"The Holy Spirit's all over you," one of Pastor Benny's assistant pastors told her. She tried to say "I know" but couldn't speak. The next thing she knew, somebody was picking her up off the floor.

"My back is fine, thank you, Lord," she remembers praying that night. "You healed me before I went to Israel because you knew I was going to do so much walking."

It's time to get back on the bus.

The Rileys reach the turquoise waters of the Dead Sea by late afternoon. It's laced with long drifts of pure white salt and

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has as a backdrop the misty blue mountains of Jordan. Anna is exultant.

"I can't believe I'm in the Holy Land," she says, holding her arms up to the desert sky. "Look at me! I never got on a plane before. Now I'm doing things I never thought I would do."

It's as if she has sprouted wings.

God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.

1 Corinthians 1:27

CHRISTOPHER HINN IS BEHIND the wheel of a rented Volvo cruising downhill at 97 miles per hour between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. He's on his way to Jaffa, where he and his famous brother were born and raised. He downshifts, the car groans, and Chris chuckles as he talks about the Benny he remembers, a small kid with a severe stuttering problem.

"He was very soft, he was meek," Chris says. "I was his spokesperson. He was so shy he didn't talk to anybody."

Chris, at 38, is a year and a half younger than Benny. He's a former private detective, airline purser and race car driver who now owns Mighty Eagle Travel Inc., the Winter Park, Fla., travel agency that arranged the Holy Land tour. On this trip, he's also Pastor Benny's public relations director.

Chris is taller and stockier than his brother, with an older brother's protective instincts.

"We used to walk to school together," Chris said. "I was like his watchdog. I got suspended once for breaking the arm of someone who hit Benny."

Chris and Benny are the sons of Greek Orthodox parents. Their mother, Clemence, an Armenian, is a "prayer warrior" who prays for hours every morning. The late Constandi Hinn, of Egyptian and Palestinian descent, was a 6-foot-2, 250-pound political functionary.

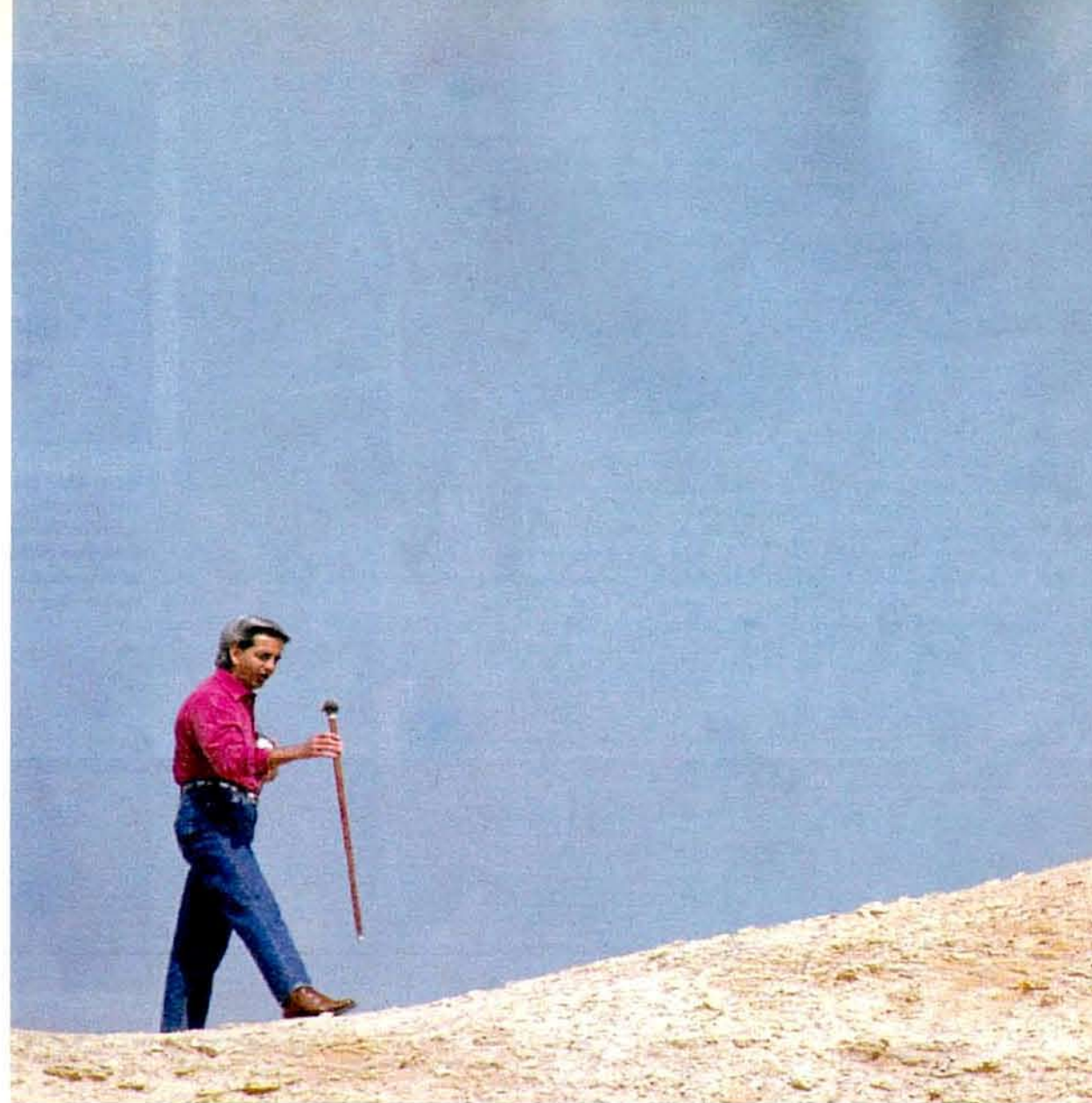
"My dad used to tell him, 'Benny, you're not going to make it in this world,'" Chris recalls. "He was really an unusual child."

When Benny was 19, he became a born-again Christian. "I thought Benny was a loony," Chris said. "I thought he lost it." The family scorned and ridiculed him. But eventually his mom and dad, his two sisters and six brothers, including Chris, all became born-again Christians. Today, four of the six Hinn boys are charismatic pastors.

The Volvo comes to a stop at College Des Freres de La Salle in Jaffa, which Chris and Benny attended nearly 30 years ago. About 20 minutes later, a GMC van pulls up. Out spill Pastor Benny, three assistant pastors, the baritone, and a TV crew.

The cameras roll as Pastor Benny is greeted at the door by the headmaster, Brother Henry Helou, who stands eye-to-eye with his former pupil. Back in the mid-1960s, Brother Henry taught catechism to Pastor Benny when he was about 10. The

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monk is stunned by the transformation.

"He was known as the stuttering kid of the school," Brother Henry tells the assistants trailing Pastor Benny. "He couldn't say one sentence correctly. It was the only remarkable thing about him," he says later. "... He was not a brilliant pupil."

In catechism class, he tells Pastor Benny, "I wanted to skip your turn because I didn't want you to be embarrassed," since it took Benny so long to speak. Pastor Benny turns away. "Now, that I didn't know," he says.

"The kids sometimes got nervous," Brother Henry says. Pastor Benny shrugs. "Nervous? They used to make fun of me."

"It was more than severe," Brother Henry says with enthusiasm. "It was awful." He imitates the student he remembers: "G-G-G-G-G-God I-I-I-I-I-I loves you."

Pastor Benny grows quieter by the moment. Right before the cameras, he's reverting to the "stuttering kid of the school."

"Honestly, those years were painful for

me" is all Pastor Benny can say.

Inside the school, Pastor Benny looks at the old wooden desk he used as a boy. Then he wanders out in the playground and points out where he used to watch the other kids play.

"Fear is what bound me," he says. "It tormented me and destroyed my self-image." When Brother Henry called on him, "man, I just froze. I couldn't talk."

In *Good Morning, Holy Spirit*, Pastor Benny explained how at age 21 he overcame his problem. The first time he stepped into the pulpit, the instant he opened his mouth to preach, he felt a numbness in his tongue and never stuttered again.

Pastor Benny began preaching all over Toronto, where his family had moved from Israel when he was 15. His father ridiculed him for being a Jesus freak. But Costandi Hinn was won over when he heard Pastor Benny preach.

"His first words to my mama were, 'That's not your son,'" Pastor Benny recalls. He looks straight into the camera.

"If God can do it for me," he says, "He

can do it for you."

And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:4-5

HER FRIENDS HELPED HER OUT of her wheelchair. But Elfie Gangloff couldn't stand up. Now the heavy-set woman in cat's-eye glasses is struggling again in the front row of a hotel auditorium in Jerusalem. And behind her, people are praying and weeping and extending their arms toward her as they urge her on.

"Get up, get up," a woman tells her. "Satan's trying to plant doubt and steal your healing from you," one man says. Pastor Benny has noticed the commotion. He walks over to the edge of the stage and tells the crowd, "Something's happening over here. God's doing something with this lady." He holds his hand out to Elfie, prays for her, and

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beckons her up on stage. But instead of standing up, Elfie collapses on the floor, slain in the Spirit. She's out cold for several minutes, flat out on her back.

Then Elfie catapults straight up and walks in a stiff-legged gait toward the stage. The 61-year-old woman from British Columbia has tears in her eyes as she climbs the stairs, gripping the railings with both hands.

"She's walking," Pastor Benny says in amazement. "She's walking. . . This lady couldn't walk."

The captain on Elfie's tour bus rushes on stage. He walks right past Pastor Benny and his outstretched microphone to give Elfie a teary embrace. "She couldn't get off the bus," the bus captain finally stammers. "We had to carry her off the bus."

A friend reports that months ago Elfie had a premonition she would be healed when she saw Jerusalem. She was so sure, she brought her doctor along. And here he is to give a diagnosis.

"She has severe lumbar disc problems," says Dale Loewen of British Columbia, as he takes the microphone. "She has terrible arthritis in both knees. One kneecap is missing. She has osteoporosis. And on and on."

People are crying and shouting Halleluia and praising Jesus. Elfie is too dazed to speak. All she can do is nod and cry. She leaves the stage and is mobbed by inspired Christians. Then she retires to the back of the auditorium, where she sits alone with her Bible, reading and rereading her prophetic Scripture, tears running down her face:

As one whom his mother comforts, / So I will comfort you; and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. / When you see this, your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like grass (Isaiah 66: 13-14).

The next day, Pastor Benny calls Elfie up for an encore. This time she can speak.

"I'm wonderful. I feel good, very good," Elfie tells Pastor Benny while she totters on stage. "I don't know what happened. I just got up and walked."

Dr. Loewen returns with startling news. "She's missing a kneecap due to an operation," he says. "And the Lord has shown he's replacing that kneecap and we're gonna get X-rays to confirm it."

In the audience, people gasp.

Pastor Benny puts Elfie through her paces. "Pick up your knees for me right here," he asks. She does it with a smile. Then she does some knee lifts, under her doctor's supervision. "Would you give the Llaaaahhrrddd a good hand," Pastor Benny thunders.

Next on stage is Elfie's husband, Harold, a thin man who says he's been healed, too, of diabetes. "Thirty-two years on the needle," he rasps. "I've used up some 15,000 needles in 25 years. I didn't take any insulin this morning and I feel great!"

Pastor Benny's voice plunges from its heavenly heights. Soberly he tells Harold to

get a complete medical checkup, and soon. Harold nods his head.

AFTER THE GANGLOFFS LEAVE the stage, Pastor Benny talks to his flock. "Lift up your hands to the Lord," he says, soothingly. "Forget about yourself. . . just love Him. Turn your attention on Him."

"No music," he snaps to the organist, who is not a regular. "Just the people singing Halleluia."

Pastor Benny's "saints" have their eyes closed, their arms lifted. Their faces are radiant, joyous, streaked with tears. They are drawing power from each other; they are summoning the Holy Spirit.

"We the flesh stand here quietly for a moment," Pastor Benny says. "Like Paul the Apostle, we cry out, 'Ohhhhh, that I

The pastor is blowing into the mike and the auditorium erupts. Down in front, rows of believers are toppling over. Women are weeping. "My God, my God, my God," a man babbles. All around the auditorium, there is the boiling gibberish of people speaking in tongues.

"Healings are taking place all over this auditorium," Pastor Benny shouts. "Just lift your hands to Him and just touch the hem of His garment as He passes by. Believe me, I'm struggling to stand on my feet."

People are coming up on stage to tell Pastor Benny about their healings, but he's not listening, he's knocking them down with the Holy Spirit.

"Jesus, Jesus," a woman yells, her arms upraised. "I felt hair coming right out of

I get a firm handshake and a confident smile from Pastor Benny, as he sweeps by in his entourage. A heartbeat later, he touches the forehead of the woman standing next to me, in the last seat by the door. As he disappears, she goes down in a heap.

For several minutes, Patricia Amundson, a young woman from Scandia, Minn., is sprawled in her seat, shoulders hunched, head back, eyes closed, mouth open. What's going on here? I check and recheck the spelling on Patricia's nametag while I run explanations through my brain. Hypnosis? The power of suggestion? A stun gun up his sleeve? When she finally comes to, Amundson is glowing.

"It's like a bolt of electricity that will go right through you," she says, smiling. "It's

he's whipping it around like a discus. He flings it at a group of pastors, and they all tumble down. All over the stage, men are lying on their backs, and other rubber-legged men are staggering backward.

"It's flowing like a river," Pastor Benny yells. The stuttering kid of Brother Henry's catechism class has turned into a powerhouse. Barney Fife is now the Terminator, and he's going to send the folks home with a finale they'll never forget.

Now he's mowing down choir members. "Sweetheart, come on," he yells, before he whacks one woman with his coat. She screams, staggers and falls. Some members dance away before they collapse, others drop as if they've been shot, and lie on the ground twitching. "That's God's power," Pastor Benny crows. "Give the Laaaahhhrrrrddddd a mighty hand of praise!"

To me, it doesn't seem like anything spiritual is going on here. It's more like cartoon mayhem, with people dropping like ducks in a carnival shooting gallery.

One of the men up on stage catching falling bodies is Mike "Hatchet" Barber, a former tight-end for the Houston Oilers who has his own prison ministry. It doesn't seem like much of a matchup — 5-foot-7, 150-pound Pastor Benny versus Barber, 6-3 and at least 250 pounds. Pastor Benny waves his right arm at Barber, and shouts, "Double it, Lord." As the people around him go down, Barber staggers and grabs the man next to him to keep his balance. But Barber's eyes close and his knees buckle. He sprawls on his back, hands clenched above his head.

"That's what you call power," Pastor Benny hoots.

A man and a woman are hanging onto each other and laughing hysterically. The woman can't stop. And she's brought the momentum to a halt. It's one of those unforeseen moments, like Harold and his insulin.

"Dear Lord, it's hitting the choir," says Pastor Benny, hands on his hips like an impatient schoolteacher. It's time for a song, he decides. He summons Lillie Knauls, a gospel singer, who steps primly around a fallen body and heads for the microphone, a wary look on her face.

Meanwhile, Barber is being helped up by Charlie McCuen, the 250-pound crusade manager. But here comes Pastor Benny. As Lillie sings "Because He touched me," Pastor Benny waves his arms over Barber's head. And Barber withers and crumples into McCuen's arms. But McCuen's eyelids flutter, his mouth opens, his cheeks flap. As Lillie sings, "I now touch you," the two big men collapse.

The timing is unbelievable. Barber goes down face-first, McCuen is laid out on his back. Pastor Benny spins around and claps his hands, delight on his face.

"If you believe, you can receive," he sings with Lillie. "Complete deliverance for your body and your soul / Because He touched me. . ."

Now Pastor Benny is calling The Inquirer photographer up on stage. The man shoots one picture after another until Pastor Benny waves an arm at him and

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Pastor Benny is mobbed by the faithful when he drops in on a tour group at the Garden of Gethsemane. Near Tiberius, on the Sea of Galilee (right), he discusses Jesus' miracle of the loaves and fishes with baritone Steve Brock. As always, the TV cameras are rolling.

might knooooow Him today.' His voice is rising. "Bring your people into a new experience," he prays. Now he hisses: "Let them see your hair like wool, eyes like fiiirrre. . . the one who says, 'Fear not, I am the Alpha and the Omega.'"

It's an unusual moment in a Pastor Benny service — dead silence. He doesn't usually let the excitement flag. For me, it's jarring.

"He's revealing himself to his people," Pastor Benny says. "God's power has fallen here."

I look up from my note pad and glance around the room. What's gonna happen now?

PhhhhhhhhhhhHHHHHHHH!

my scalp."

"You can feel it?" Pastor Benny asks. The woman lifts up a wig and oohhs go through the crowd. On a mostly barren scalp, there are wisps of dark hair.

"My asthma, my arthritis, everything is gone," another woman cries.

On stage more bodies are toppling, but it's 5 o'clock and the service must end promptly on the eve of the Sabbath. Pastor Benny reaches out to the people as he leaves the stage.

I'm down in my front-row seat, second from the exit. I'm still standing, but I have no rational explanation for why my forearms are shaking or why my palms are so hot.

a wonderful feeling. You're drinking in the presence of God."

EIGHTEEN HUNDRED PEOPLE are roaring. It's the last healing service of the tour, at Kibbutz Eingeve on the Sea of Galilee, and up on stage, Pastor Benny is pulling out all the stops.

He blows into the microphone, and rows of people tumble over in front of me. "He isn't putting me down," I say to myself. I dig in my heels, and celebrate staying upright. I just wish I could explain the wind I feel rushing around my legs.

Pastor Benny calls all the preachers in the audience up on stage. He has stripped off his tan double-breasted suit jacket, and

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blows into the microphone.

PhhhhhhhhhHHHHHHHH!

The photographer falls back, a look of rapture on his face. On the ground, his hands tremble above his head. "Halleluia," Pastor Benny yells. Pandemonium. The crowd is on its feet, roaring.

"Take his picture," Pastor Benny shouts. An assistant pastor takes the photographer's camera from around his neck and shoots him while he's down. Then it's Pastor Benny's turn to

shoot.

The photographer staggers up, but Pastor Benny comes by and grabs him lightly by the chin. He goes down even harder than the first time, his legs and arms flapping as if a few hundred volts are surging through him.

Pastor Benny is lit. "Is this for real?" he screams. "Of course it's for real. Why do you think the Apostles were accused of being drunk? It's because they didn't act sober!"

For me, it's last call. I'm sitting next to the TV platform in the middle of the auditorium,



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THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER DECEMBER 12, 1993

and thinking *I could be next*. I drop the lid on my computer, and tell Jeff Pittman, the TV producer, "I've seen enough for one night, I am out of here." Then I rush out of the auditorium.

I may be a coward, but I don't plan to end up on Pastor Benny's highlight reel.

The night air at the dairy kibbutz reeks of cow manure, which works like smelling salts on my panicky brain. I spend some time pacing. Then I stick my head back in the auditorium to see Yair, Pastor Benny's Israeli driver, on stage singing and leading a large group that's dancing the Hava Nagila.

When the service ends, people stream out of the auditorium. Here comes Mike Barber, red-faced and upright, sniffing the air. He had never been slain in the Spirit before, he snorts, and he still can't get over it.

"Brother, I don't do that," he says, his eyes flashing. "It just absolutely takes your legs out from under you."

The photographer has a wild look in his eye as he leaves the auditorium.

"What happened back there, what was it like?" I ask.

"Major buzz, man, major buzz."

For He shall give his angels charge over you,

To keep you in all your ways
Psalm 91:11

THE PLANE RIDE BACK TO the States is 13 hours long, 13 hours after a full day of riding back to the airport in Tel Aviv, 13 hours without a bed or a shower. People are drooping in their seats, burrowing their heads into pillows.

Only one man looks energetic. And well-groomed.

"The nice people are fixing themselves, putting makeup on," Pastor Benny says on the public address phone. "I think they look beautiful."

I can't believe it. The little guy wants another healing service, so the TV cameramen hover nearby. "My cameraman just told me some of the people said, 'If you use my picture, I'll punch you,'" Pastor Benny jokes. "We need to pray for those people."

He sings, he prays. Migraine headaches disappear; so do cancerous lumps and ear infections. But for me it's old hat. I've seen enough. I'm ready for a nap. But that's not in the plan. It's time instead for one more mystery, this time a personal message from the Almighty.

Up the aisle ambles Frank

Rossi from Plantation, Fla. "You guys are from the newspaper?" he says, with a big smile. "I've got a story for you."

Frank's a retired career cop who worked for 26½ years, first with the Newark, N.J., Police Department, then with the Metro-Dade PD. He still talks like a cop. Here's Frank, describing a shootout at a White Castle: "I pop a couple, they pop a couple."

In May 1980, he was the first cop pulled from his car during the Dade County riots. Here's Frank telling that story: The rioters haul him out of the car and kick and beat him. Frank fights his way back into his idling Gremlin. The rioters smash the car windows, and Frank is blinded by the flying glass. He lies across his bucket seat unseeing and stomps on the gas pedal. The car roars over a bridge and away from the mob.

Frank is safe. But his nerves are shot. He's suffering from migraines. He's popping tranquilizers and sleeping pills. When they wear off, he turns into a maniac. He barricades himself in his room. He's smashing furniture, cursing family members.

In desperation, Frank goes to a prayer meeting. There, prayer warriors lay hands on Frank, and the demons of hatred and oppression leave his body. Now he barricades himself in his bedroom again, this time to devour the King James Bible. And Frank discovers the greatest power in the world, and it isn't guns or nightsticks or Mace.

"No one can fight love," Frank says, shaking and crying. "There's no defense against love."

From an ex-cop, these are powerful words. And there's more. Frank survives a massive heart attack in 1982, and in '89 his arteries have unclogged enough for doctors to perform a successful angioplasty.

"I've got a good doctor," he says. "My doctor's name is Jesus. And I gave him my heart in September 1980."

The plane lights are dim and blink. The jumbo jet has hit some turbulence. I'm worried. Frank's laughing.

"This plane isn't going to crash," he tells me. "There are no coincidences in the world. Everybody is on this plane for a reason. You guys were hand-picked by the creator of the universe to come on this trip. . . to see and to witness what He wanted you to see."

Frank bows his head to pray, and I notice something eerie. He's got the same shape of head

and hairline as my father, who has survived two craniotomies, with significant brain damage. Suddenly, I don't feel like I'm talking to a stranger anymore.

I tell Frank about my father.

"He'll be healed," Frank says. Frank stands up and gives me a sweaty bear hug and kiss. He's too much. In one in-your-face guy, Frank embodies all the evangelical fervor of Pastor Benny's entire crowd. Yet, what seems crazy cannot be dismissed.

"I love you whether you like it or not," Frank says. He looks remarkably composed as he heads back to his seat. "It was nice talking to you guys."

Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord
Ephesians 5:18-19

IT'S A GRAY, DRIZZLY SUNDAY morning in South Philadelphia. The streets are covered with sooty piles of snow. Anna Riley is standing on the corner of Broad and Snyder, rain glistening on her thick hair and black suede coat. She's wearing a black button on her lapel, "Serving Jesus 24 • 7" with the dot lit by a pulsating red light.

"I serve Jesus 24 hours a day, seven days a week," she explains.

It might be raining in South Philly, but Anna is thinking about Mediterranean sunshine. And seagulls and fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee.

"I miss the Holy Land," she says dreamily. "It went by too fast. I want to go back."

Me, I'm not so sure. I don't know if I could handle another road trip with Pastor Benny, Frank and the rest of the gang. But I no longer wonder whether Pastor Benny's for real. He is for real to his followers, as real as their own powerful experiences.

There's an hour before services at Messiah Church at 13th and Wolf. Plenty of time to serve the Lord. Anna is carrying a stack of printed invitations decorated with hand-painted red roses. Under her breath, she's singing, "I Will Sing of the Mercies of the Lord."

She moves quickly, a new boldness in her step.

"Good morning," she says, to a man with his head down, cigar dangling as he descends into the subway. "I'd like to invite you to church," she says, handing him an invitation. "And tell you about the Lord and what He's done for us."