

## Forgotten God

February 25, 2018

Title Ideas: Fanning the Flame or Dousing the Spark

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

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It was a beautiful sunny afternoon. It was hot, but what can you expect for late June in the Dominican Republic. It was mission trip 2010 and we were once again in our bus travelling from one place to another. After three days of construction we had a lighter day scheduled. The morning had been spent with the local children running a Vacation Bible School and now we were on our way to an afternoon of sun and relaxation on the beach. We arrived at the beach and people quickly began to head into the water. I was in no rush but eventually wandered down to check on the water. I passed a companion who was hopping on one foot and grimacing in pain. A short distance away, another friend was lying in the sand in similar discomfort. The word of the cause quickly spread – Jellyfish. Now I'd never been stung by a jellyfish, but it's really the only phobia I have that I can think of. The fear doesn't paralyze me, but when I see jellyfish in the water I tend to not enjoy it much because I spend so much time looking around to make sure there are none near me. With the fact that two people had been stung so early in our visit, and seeing the jellyfish in the water, was enough for me to decide that maybe aquatic activities were going to be out today.

So I found other ways to enjoy the day. A group of us took a long walk along the beach, and when we returned, I was surprised at the growing list of those that had been stung. But I was really **amazed** at the number of people that were still in the water. Now I know that in Spongebob Squarepants, jellyfish stings are painful – but in a 3 Stooges kind of way. The real thing was no joke! From the looks of the welts, and the reactions of those that had been stung, they hurt! I began to wonder: How many Christians need to be stung by jellyfish before they'll get out of the water.

As the day wound down I found myself sitting with a group down near the water when there was a call for everybody to head in for a final dip. I quickly found myself alone. I have to confess here now: I bowed down to peer pressure. I stood up, pulled off my t-shirt and ran down and into the water – not slowing so that I wouldn't lose my nerve. I hopped a couple of waves and then dove in and swam underwater until I reached the group. I popped up next to Kami Schaal who exclaimed, "Hey! You're over your fear of jellyfish!" "Heck no," I replied. I turned around and began to swim back, until I got to knee deep water, where I began to run back out the same way I went in; quickly. After about two strides though, I felt a painful stinging sensation on the top of my foot, followed by two more attacks on the ankle. I was yet another victim. As we packed up I found that I was the final victim of the day, so I had answered my own question. 14! It takes 14 Christians to be stung by jellyfish before they'll get out of the water.

Even though we may not want to admit it, we all have fears of one kind or another. They come in different types and different extremes. One person's fear may seem silly to another, but is all too real. Some fears are minor inconveniences while in another it can be a big problem. If I had aviophobia, a fear of flying, I would consider that a minor inconvenience in that I'm not called to fly very often. But if my friend Dave Outcalt, a commercial pilot, were to come down with that same fear, it would be tough for him to continue his career. And if Doug were to come down with glossophobia, the fear of public speaking, I imagine you could all look forward to seeing a little bit more of Martha, Linda and me up here.

So what do we do about, or with, those fears? Do we handle them, or do they handle us? Some people give in to them and let the fear take control. They make every effort possible to avoid the situations that frighten them. Because of that, a lot of great positive things in life can be missed. Some people try to ignore the fear, or at least just deal with it. Normally, when there are some jellyfish around me, I try to just ignore them. The day I shared about; well there were just too many to ignore. We can also try to overcome them in different ways. There are any number of doctors and counselors that can help us – and there are some that do an amazing job. But we often seem to forget something really important. We have the Counselor with us; at all times. We have the Holy Spirit, who resides in us, that is available to help us at any and all times. And we can reach out to Him, any time!

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. - 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

It is often possible to become confused by this type of verse. How do we do this? How are we supposed to: "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances." Can't come to your concert sweetie. I'm rejoicing. I'm not sure why I was fired honey. Something about not getting the job done because I was on my knees praying all day. Boy, I'm really glad that I fell down those stairs that time last year.

Those verses don't mean that is the only thing we should be doing; they mean that we can be doing them all of the time. Why? Because the Holy Spirit is residing in us, anywhere we go, all of the time. We're not limited to rejoicing based upon when we go to service. That special time that you put aside for your quiet time in prayer with God is important, but we are not limited in when we can pray. So go ahead, pray at work. We can be thankful in all circumstances. I am thankful that when I did fall down the stairs all I did was bruise my back and didn't damage this (point to head), any more than it already is. With the Holy Spirit residing in our heart, we can do that. But that in itself can be scary. The idea that God is inside us.

What if one of our fears is a fear of God? We've probably all heard the phrase, the "Fear of God," but I don't believe that is meant in a way that we should be frightened of Him. Sure, as sinners we should all have a little fear in our hearts as we think ahead to the time of judgement before him. But generally the fear of God is better translated as an awe or reverence towards Him. We look at the Father, God above us, and we see majesty and glory. As a Father there should be honor, love and obedience to the one that took us as his adopted children.

We look at Jesus, God with us, and we see our Lord and Savior. He came to live with us, to teach us, to take our sins upon him, and die for us so that we get eternal life. How great is that?

Then there is the Holy Spirit, God in us. That is where the actual fear of God seems to be the most prevalent. And there are a couple of seemingly opposite reasons for this. Like Doug said last week, the Holy Spirit is the one we know and understand least, but he is also the one that is closest, and with this closeness come fear.

The fear that he doesn't answer our prayers. We pray and we get upset when it appears that He doesn't hear us, or answer our prayers: at least in the way that we expect. We pray for success, and it eludes us. We ask for guidance and help in raising our children, and we experience pain. We pray for healing, and we come away feeling ignored. So we struggle; maybe get angry and distance ourselves from Him. We do the exact opposite of what we should be doing.

And sometimes, we settle. We lower our expectations of what we can receive from Him. We ask for little, or just enough; almost as if we are praying for things we know we are going to get, just so that we won't be disappointed. And that is sad because there is so much that he wants to give us.

<sup>10</sup> And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, "Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep *me* from evil, that I may not cause pain!" So God granted him what he requested. - 1 Chronicles 4:10 NKJV

Bruce Wilkinson, the author of the book, "The Prayer of Jabez", describes the request by Jabez.

"I love the urgency, the personal vulnerability of his plea. In Hebrew, adding "indeed" to this prayer was like adding five exclamation points, or writing the request in capital letters and underlining it.

In my mind's eye, I picture Jabez standing before a massive gate recessed into a sky-high wall. Weighed down by the sorrow of his past and the dreariness of his present, he sees before him only impossibility – a future shut off. But raising his hands to heaven, he cries out, "Father, oh, Father! Please bless me! And what I really mean is...bless me a lot!"

I love that! It suggests that God will give to us, maybe even more than we need. Why? To hoard and take while others live in need? No! God wants to fill us up, even to overflowing. We fill up, for us. What overflows is to go to others. Don't try to limit what the Holy Spirit wants to give you. Ask for more.

We also fear that we won't understand what the Spirit is saying to us. The prayers we make are answered, but not in ways we expected or understand. It's almost as if we feel he didn't understand what we were saying. Like that Christmas present we asked for, and the gift under the tree definitely isn't the same thing. Or the answer confuses us. Last Sunday was the quarterly recovery service. At every recovery service we ask a member of the recovery community to share their testimony. He talked about a time when he was at a dangerous crossroads. He had reached a point in his addiction where he honestly prayed that either the addiction, or his life, be taken from him. He ended up in prison. He didn't understand. How could God have gotten so confused by his request? What was going on? But, while he was in that prison, a cellmate invited him to come to a church service with him. He refused. So he asked again...and again, until he

finally agreed to go. At that service, he was introduced him to Jesus. His life was to change, forever.

Then there is the scariest of options; the possibility of the Spirit actually answering our prayers.

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. - 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21

We pray to God. We ask for guidance, clarity, a focus, a plan. We need to know, “how can I serve you?”. We are saying, **“Oh, that you would bless me indeed!!!!”** And then, he does. Suddenly, through scripture, prayer, a dream or a conversation with a friend – we hear what God has to say to us. And do we say, **“Hallelujah!”**? No. We say, “There must be a mistake. You don’t understand. I can’t do that. That’s not my gift. That makes me uncomfortable. I don’t want to do that. I’m not listening!”

Back in 2007 the church was doing a sermon series on Rick Warren’s, “40 Days of Community” and most of the Woodside growth groups were participating in the bible study. Michelle and I were in a Friday night couples group. Well, one evening the group was discussing the ministry requirement of the study when the Holy Spirit stepped in, through Dan Regan.

#### Dan’s Video

The Holy Spirit had lit a spark in Dan, and he brought forth the flame. Less than a week later, a member of our group was at work and talking with a patient. Somehow the conversation turned to Dan’s suggestion of prison ministry during bible study. The patient, who ***just happened*** to be an Associate Pastor at Bensalem’s Christian Life Center, shared that their church had a prison ministry. Now she had a choice to make. She could fan the flame by bringing the conversation to us the next Friday night. Or, she could douse the spark and forget that anything happened. That Friday night we agreed that we should reach out to this ministry, and the next week, two of the leaders of that prison ministry were sitting in that same living room explaining what prison ministry really was. Within 4 to 6 weeks 7 of us, 3 of the men and 4 of the women, were walking through the hallways of Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, a maximum security Philadelphia men’s prison, in order to observe one of the worship services conducted by CLPRM.

The Holy Spirit can work in us in amazing and powerful ways. But remember; he is our Counselor. We still have a big part to play in it – just like you do with your attorney. He can make suggestions on what is best for you, but you need to act on them.

Listen – Listen to Him when He talks to you. Understand that he has your best interests at heart. He knows you better than you know yourself.

Understand – Sometimes it all seems very clear and we know what we should do. Sometimes it can be confusing. Talk about it. Pray to Him; Read the Book; talk to prayer partners or mentors.

Act – You can listen all you want, and discuss it to death. But in the end, you need to act. Try something different. Take a chance. Move outside of your comfort zone. You might get a little uncomfortable. You might even end up doing something you don’t wish to do again. But so what? Or, you might find that the Holy Spirit has placed you in just the place that you need to be.

That little spark that began 11 years ago has not only changed my life, but it has affected many others as well. CLPRM has grown from about a half dozen people leading one worship service a week and distributing some bibles, to a 501c3 corporation with over 100 volunteers. Every month the ministry now leads about 30 worship services, meetings and coffee houses. In 2010 Woodside began The Church Has Left the Building. Through our contacts at CLPRM we were able to hold a recovery worship service at Calvary Full Gospel. After repeating the event in 2011, we decided to make it a quarterly Woodside event and last week began our seventh year of the Quarterly Recovery Worship Service and Luncheon. This has led to bringing outside artists in to lead worship at various Sunday services as well as the occasional Christian concert and coffee houses here. Last June we opened the Recovery Café, a monthly coffee house held in the Frankford section of Philadelphia. We have held 9 Café's since and dozens of Woodside members have volunteered, led worship and donated baked goods and, by being such a blessing to others, have been blessed abundantly.

Woodside's plan this year for the Church Has Left the Building is to get each growth group to pick a ministry or mission idea to do together, like we did with the 40 Days of Community series. Take the time now to start thinking of ideas for that. It doesn't have to be something that scares you, but try to make it something that challenges you. Let the Spirit guide you.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. - 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Let's pray.