

CHIEF MINISTRIES

December 2014

Happy Holidays!

May the joy of the Savior surround you and your family this wonderful time of the year.

Another year - GONE! That is awesome, unless you haven't redeemed the time. We are called to stretch out the arms of our minds and hearts, to find ourselves, Christ-shaped, cross-shaped, at the intersection of the past, present and future of God's time and our time. We have been called to live joyfully and sometimes painfully, in the story that is both His and ours. Let every heart, prepare Him room.....

If you love God, you will do everything possible to serve and please Him. Love is impatient to do good. It is also quick and active and observant. Faith will encourage you. Hope will set you spinning like the spring in a watch. Reverence for God will rouse you out of your sleepiness. Enthusiasm for spiritual things will set you on fire. The more aware you are of God, the more involved you will be in working for Him.

Jeremiah said that his call felt like *fire shut up in his bones* (20:9). The fire that kept him going when all else failed. But Jeremiah learned at Benjamin's gate that it is easily quenchable. Dull churchmanship is a fire extinguisher. Business meetings, deacon meetings, committee meetings and various assorted Congregational criticisms all tend to douse the flame - to quench the fire in our bones.

How wonderful are those churches in which the church's members are also its ministers! Such is the prison church, or so it should be. They are God-called. Their passion burns, their inner fire rages. They t fry heir old alarm clocks and can't wait for sunrise. They have an indestructible spirit. They don't buckle under gossip (because what's being said isn't true). They outlast their foes. They survive their critics. They awake to praise God on the mornings of their most foreboding trials.

The call of God is so much more than a divine employment agency. Too often the call is equated with vocation: Usher, elder, deacon, steward, clerk, worship leader, Sunday school teacher, greeter, librarian, artist, SSI, you get the point. As if God's call is only valid if it means a job in the Ministry. The call is more of a relationship than a vocation. A zeal for God. An intensity of emotion for the things of God. Angels can't help but applaud the kneeling and hungry who are famished for God. Only the call will push you past the hurts in life to fulfill it.

Fifty percent of those who attend a worship service in America entered the church with some kind of problem. But that's all right because fifty percent of the time ministers also enter the service with some kind of a problem. Yet, they preach anyway as do spiritually healthy laypeople serve with joy.

I, too, have felt I've been to Benjamin's gate in ministry. Where my need seemed greater than God's supply. Where Sunday morning worship seemed to be the service of the dead. Spiritually needy souls have quarreled their way to church. The light print is read out of the hymnal while those who still have a pulse read the dark. Then here comes the sermon: "Here are some general sins," calls the discouraged messenger. "Pick a few and apply them to your neighbors".

Why would any Christian go on with desperate futility clinging to his call? Because the best believers make a covenant with their calling. When you live in covenant with your calling, life flows easier. My suspicion is that only those who can bless the furnace ever understand the gold. Tough times don't last for long, but tough Saints go on forever. The calling gets us through tough times. We serve because we feel called, and then we serve because we don't. It is not as though we fake it until we make it. We take it till we make it. Callings are insistent. They keep us on edge, summoning up the courage to do what God wants done.

God sometimes heals by breaking - Jeremiah cries out to God, and God who is his only friend, suddenly is unavailable. The silence of God breaks his spirit so that by his wounds he may mature in ministry.

"All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3: 16) that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." You don't get smart by getting old. You get smart by hurting and healing and evaluating your scars.

We cry out to Him during our hurt and healing and we don't seem to get anything but silence. When God is silent is usually when we need Him most to remind us of our calling. Where is He when the fire in our bones has turned to ashes and we can't find Him? Where is He when we cry with Job, "Oh that I knew where I might find Him." We want to feel positive about God.

God healed the world once and for all on a hilltop through his own incarnate brokenness. Now the world that we have seen can only be healed by our same brokenness. Jeremiah's suffering reveals an irreconcilable truth: When we get self-important, God often gets quiet. It is not the prevalence of words of people that troubles the prophet, it is the absence of the words of God. Jeremiah was caught in the crisis of war that was destroying his beloved homeland. He lived in times that made him rich with wounds that only God could heal.

What do unwounded servants do? They become arrogant, join Christian country clubs, sell out to mediocrity because only the ones who isolate themselves and feel protected have the privilege of making theology a discussion, the endangered cling to it and weep. Theologians like this have too little need for God.

Jeremiah lived a wounded life and wounding kills irrelevance even as Christ-like living puts a continuing sense of the call into earnest believers. The old proverb: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me," is not true. Words do hurt. Words ultimately wound us with eternal scars. Words can tear divine purpose from our vision and leave us only small reasons for living. Words can test our call. Great Christians are married to that call. They are joined to what God wants to do in their lives. The call is a fire shut up in our bones. The fire is a Bunsen burner under a beaker of joy and joy is proof of the presence of God. It is why Jesus said *"My burden is light"* (Matthew 11:30)

All the suffering that are thrust upon us can serve to bring us to maturity. We should treasure the pain that sculpts us into the image of Christ. We are the living crucibles that hold the fire of God.

Paul never rises higher than in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ^{v8} Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ^{v9} But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ^{v10} For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Therefore, since we are made strong by our areas of need, we must treasure our wounds and celebrate our hurts. *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ^{v13} But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ^{v14} If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. (1 Peter 4:12-14 ESV)*

Christ in our lives is never strong until we are weak. As our strength diminishes the strength of Christ grows in us. When we are entirely emptied of our own strength, then we are full of Christ's strength. As much as we keep of our own, we lack His!

Come fellow crucibles, welcomed the fire inside of you, treasure the flame of God's intention burning at the center of your souls. May the lessons of Jeremiah 20 never forsake us. May it be said of us that we are Christians who didn't always understand ourselves and sometimes didn't even like ourselves, but in our bones raged the fire unquenchable that at last consumed our words and ourselves.

In the last part of Schindler's List, the war is over and Oskar Schindler laments that he still owns a gold Nazi lapel pin. He rips it from his coat and cries sadly, "with this bit of gold I could have ransomed two more Jewish lives!" What are two more saved when 6 million were lost? Well, to Oskar Schindler, two was everything! No...one is everything! He had not quite spent everything on his calling. He stared at the bit of untraded gold and wept. Itzhak Stern touches him on the shoulder and gives him a little piece of paper upon which is written, "He who saves one life, saves the world in time."

Do you know why you are in the world?

Have you identified the "fire in your bones"?

Have you wept with the prophet, yet woke up every morning to the agony and the ecstasy of your call?

Have you camped out in 2 Corinthians 12 thanking God for your thorns and begging him to give you your passport to meaningful living?

When your passport arrives you will open it to find your picture below Christ's. Your calling will be certain. And as you pass every doorway of your life thereafter, the immigration officer will smile and stamp your passport: "Ambassador: for Christ".

Finish this statement in 25 words or less: "As far as God is concerned, the main reason I am in the world is to

God has a plan my friends. Don't give up and do give in to God's will. Seek Him. Find Him. No compromise. I love you all and pray you all fulfill your calling.

Have a blessed season of celebrating the Advent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Chief

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