

TOSC DEVOTIONAL

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IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

There is a well-known vision of Ellen White which is recorded in Volume 8 of the Testimonies, pp. 104-106. The title of the chapter is named, "What Might Have Been," and dated, January 5, 1903. It is a letter addressed to the Battle Creek Church. Here is an abbreviated account of this letter:

"One day at noon I was writing of the work that might have been done at the last General Conference if the men in positions of trust had followed the will and way of God.... I had written thus far when I lost consciousness, and I seemed to be witnessing a scene in Battle Creek.

"We were assembled in the auditorium of the Tabernacle.... Most earnest supplication was made to God. The meeting was marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The work went deep, and some present were weeping aloud.

"One arose from his bowed position and said that in the past he had not been in union with certain ones and had felt no love for them, but that now he saw himself as he was. With great solemnity he repeated the message to the Laodicean church.... I now see that this is my condition. My eyes are opened.... I thought myself righteous, but my heart is broken, and I see my need of the precious counsel of the One who has searched me through and through....

"The speaker turned to those who had been praying, and said: 'We have something to do. We must confess our sins, and humble our hearts before God.' He made heartbroken confessions and then stepped up to several of the brethren, one after another, and extended his hand, asking forgiveness. Those to whom he spoke sprang to their feet, making confession and asking forgiveness, and they fell upon one another's necks, weeping. The spirit of confession spread through the entire congregation. It was a Pentecostal season. God's praises were sung, and far into the night, until nearly morning, the work was carried on.... No one seemed to be too proud to make heartfelt confession.... There was rejoicing such as never before had been heard in the Tabernacle.

"Then I was aroused from my unconsciousness, and for a while could not think where I was. My pen was still in my hand. The words were spoken to me: 'This might have been. All this the Lord was waiting to do for His people. All heaven was waiting to be gracious.' I thought of where we might have been had thorough work been done at the last General Conference, and an agony of disappointment came over me as I realized that what I had witnessed was not a reality."

I don't know about you, but when I read this account, I feel uncomfortable. Such open confessions and expressions of emotion in a group setting are hard to imagine. And staying up almost all night seems excessive and exhausting! But then, I recall other times in my life when I have seen God move in a most powerful way. Most notably, I remember a little prayer group which my daughter, Karen, and I attended at the home of Jerry and Janet Page, many years ago when Jerry was the president of the Pennsylvania Conference. The purpose of our meetings was to seek for revival for ourselves and for the conference.

There were only six in attendance. The first winter passed, and although we enjoyed each other's company and became close friends, nothing happened that we could honestly call, "revival." Summer came, and with it many duties and responsibilities. Our meetings were adjourned until the next fall when life resumed a slower pace. This time, we agreed to do something different. We would dispense with lengthy preliminaries, and get right into the subject for the evening. We would be open with each other about our struggles, and our need to pray for one another right in the group. We would not put a time limit on the ending of the meeting if the Spirit of God was moving us to continue praying and interceding for one another and for God's people.

For a little while, things continued as usual. And then one night it happened. One member of the group shared a deep, heartfelt need for help in a personal area of concern. Immediately Jerry divided us into three groups of two, and assigned each pair a room where we could pray together for the need that was presented. I don't remember how long the prayers continued, but it was past the usual time for closing the meeting and retiring to our separate homes. Finally we rejoined, and again prayed together, and rejoiced together, and knew that the Spirit of God had come down into our midst that night.

But that was only the beginning! From that time on, prayer became an increasing emphasis in the Pennsylvania Conference. Led by Jerry and Janet, the word began to spread. Jerry asked Janet to lead out in a women's retreat, and that year 104 ladies came. Janet's openness in confessing that she had never done anything like this before, and was nervous and afraid to speak to an audience, set the tone for open communication and prayer for all who came to the retreat. And again, the Spirit of God came down, and many hearts and lives were changed. When the ladies went home, they took revival with them. Soon reports were coming back to the conference office from the men, who were asking, "What happened at the women's retreat that has changed our wives and the women of our church who attended? Whatever it was, we want it too!"

Meanwhile Jerry was changing some things at the conference office. Instead of a brief prayer and getting on with business at the staff meetings, Jerry led out in prayer sessions that added prayer power to the meetings, and emphasized the importance of prayer in grappling with the challenges of operating the conference. This, too, began to spread to the members of the conference churches, and the comment was heard from the men, "If Jerry can do it, we can do it too!" Since that time, Jerry and Janet have become widely known for their leadership in emphasizing the power of prayer. From that one little prayer group of six, came a revival that has influenced countless people around the world.

I tell this story to emphasize not only the importance, but the necessity of being open and honest with each other, and to let the Holy Spirit lead where He will, in order to come to the unity and power that all of us desire. Division of thought is common in human relationships, because we see our own points of view and beliefs so clearly, and we believe them with all our heart. But God calls for unity among His people. Read with me Eph. 4:1-6:

"I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when

you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Notice that the text says, “the unity of the Spirit.” Using the Sanctuary model, the lampstand, which represents the Holy Spirit, is located in the Holy Place. If we follow the officiating priest on his daily rounds, we can see that he never approached the lampstand until he had performed the sacrifice at the brazen altar, and washed himself at the laver. The New Testament application of this imagery is an example for the worshipping Christian to approach God in the same designated manner. The following quotations from Ellen White are only a few of the many that point out the importance of understanding the meaning of the Sanctuary as applied to our daily lives.

“We all need to keep the subject of the Sanctuary in mind.... There is a Sanctuary in heaven, and...a pattern of this Sanctuary was once built on earth. God desires His people to become familiar with this pattern, keeping ever before their minds the heavenly Sanctuary where God is all and in all.” Ltr 233, 1904.

“It was Christ who planned the arrangement for the first earthly tabernacle. He...was the heavenly architect who marked out the plan for the sacred building where His name was to be honored.” COL 349.

“I saw that everything in heaven was in perfect order. Said the angel, ‘Behold ye and know how perfect, how beautiful the order in heaven; follow it.’ EW XXX, XXXI.

[By the punishment of Nadab and Abihu,] “God designed to teach the people that they must approach Him with reverence and awe, and in His own appointed manner.” PP 357.

Notice also the similar concepts which are found in Eze. 43:10, 11:

“Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple—its arrangement, its exits and entrances—its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations.”

Now the question becomes, What can we learn from the Sanctuary that will help us in the enormous challenge that we face here in this committee? We are seeking understanding; we are seeking to become unified on one of the most important issues facing our church today; we are seeking the wisdom and will of our Heavenly Father, and of Jesus our precious Savior; and we are seeking an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds to the facets of this subject which will represent God’s will, and not ours. And what does the Sanctuary have to tell us which will help us reach this goal?

Let’s take one more look at the Sanctuary design. The first step toward relationship with God is praise. “Enter into gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise.” Ps. 100:4. Perhaps for our purpose here, the glorious healing and uniting power of praise needs no further accolades. But I do want to stop for a few minutes to consider the absolute necessity of an “altar of sacrifice” experience for everyone who

wants to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as did the disciples at Pentecost. Confession and humbling of self is the experience that prepared the hearts of the disciples to receive the power and unity which they needed to take the gospel to the then-known world. And nothing less than this will prepare the church today to receive the blessings which are to be received in the outpouring of the Latter Rain.

The brazen altar in the Sanctuary pointed forward to the cross. This was the place where the worshipper confessed his sins over the head of the lamb that represented Christ. It was the place where sin was recognized and self was laid down; where the human suppliant let go of his anger, his bitterness, his lust and his pride. And the blood that was shed by the innocent lamb brought him into unity with God and with his fellow companions who also made that journey to the cross. And now, with hearts full of praise and thanksgiving for what God had done for them, they were prepared to receive the life-giving witness of the Holy Spirit.

But there was one more step that the priest must perform before entering the Holy Place. He must pause at the laver and wash his hands and feet, symbolic of cleansing the heart from sin, as well as literally washing away the accumulated blood and dust before entering God's presence. Only then was he prepared to minister before the Lord.

In the New Testament, the experiential application of these rituals becomes more meaningful. Paul speaks of dying with Christ, being crucified with Him, so that we will no longer be slaves to sin (Rom. 6:6). And the purpose of this is so that we may serve Him "in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code." Rom. 7:6. And again, using the symbolism of the Sanctuary, he writes:

"Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." Eph. 5:26, 27.

At this point, I want to suggest how the Sanctuary journey can help us in this committee to reach the goal that I believe each of us is longing to see – that of harmony, love and unity such as the disciples had at Pentecost. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was made possible because the disciples followed the divine prescription laid out in the Sanctuary, which necessitates heart and mind cleansing before the Rain can fall. It means humility before glory, confession before reconciliation, dying to one's own need to be heard or recognized before we can hear and recognize the still small voice bringing enlightenment and healing.

I have a story to tell you today from my own life. This is a story about my sister. I have only one, and she is 10 ½ years younger than I am. I went off to Academy when she was only five, and then college, and marriage, and a family of my own. Life was hard for my little sister during those years, because my father became mentally ill, and my mother had to work six nights a week to support the family. She was not able to escape the trauma of the situation, and although she married a fine man and had a family of her own, she battled with depression. Finally her husband retired, and they came to live in an apartment in my home to help care for our aging mother. For 10 years, until the death of our mother, my sister and her husband lived in our home. She continued to struggle with depression, and many times she would

take out her feelings on me, accusing me to my face and saying things behind my back to others that were untrue.

One day her accusations reached the limit of my endurance. After a particularly searing verbal attack, I broke. I went to my room and screamed out my pain and anger to God, pounded my desk, and cried and wept as the waves of agony rolled over me. For two days I was inconsolable. Finally after the second day, I was calm enough to talk to God and hear His voice. "What do you want me to do, Lord?" I asked. "I want you to listen to your sister and empathize with her," He said. "I want you to hear her pain and heal it with your love."

I went down the stairs to her apartment. "Sissy," I asked. "Would you like to come up and talk for a while about the things that are bothering you?" "Yes," she said hesitantly. "Yes, I would." When we were seated comfortably in my living room, she began to talk. And I listened. For the first time, I really began to know my little sister; the pain of her life, the depression, the sadness and hurt and loneliness. I didn't think about me anymore. I listened and I loved her, and I knew she was feeling my love.

Four and ½ hours later, she was done. "I know I have done some things wrong to you, too," she said, "and I am sorry. I haven't always been right." "It's alright, Sissy. I forgive you, and I hope you will forgive me, too. I don't want to ever hurt you or make you sad by anything I do or say. I want us always to be friends." She stood up and we hugged. It was bedtime when we parted with sweet words and expressions of love.

That was four years ago, and since that day, not a cloud or shadow has passed between us. She and her husband have recently moved to their own home after the death of my mother. But those years together have left us both with memories of fun and sister-bonding that will last forever.

Since that time I have used this experience as a model for bringing harmony into troubled relationships. As a family counselor, I see many people with seemingly irreconcilable differences, years of pain and misunderstanding, locked in a cycle of depression, anger, resentment, hopelessness, with no apparent solution to their situation except withdrawal and separation. In my experience, as long as each person focuses his or her attention upon their own grievances and their own point of view, there is no lasting hope of reconciliation. But if just one person is willing to step out in faith, lay aside their personal feelings, and humbly listen without retaliation or rebuttal, the Holy Spirit can bring understanding, love and healing, and the peace and joy that the presence of Jesus always brings. As a result, I have seen marriages saved, friends reconciled, and families put back together. The Sanctuary model holds the key to reconciliation with both God and man, and opens the door to all the blessings that heaven is waiting to bestow upon His people.

Which brings us back to the vision of Ellen White 111 years ago. A great spiritual blessing that God had in store for His people was left unclaimed. In mercy God waits even now to bestow that blessing. It is time – yes, even past time – for Jesus to come and take His children home. The angels, almost visibly, are continuing to hold back the winds of strife. But a storm is coming, relentless in its fury, and many will be those who are left without a shelter because they waited too long to prepare their hearts for the refreshing, finishing work of the Latter Rain which alone can ripen the harvest of the earth.

As leaders, we, right here in this committee, can model the preparation needed for that outpouring. Just as Jerry and Janet modeled the humility and powerful prayer life that spawned a revival in the Pennsylvania Conference, how much greater impact can the members of this committee have upon the entire world church. We are being watched to see what God will do here. Of ourselves, we can do nothing. All our scholarship, as wonderful as it is, will not bring down the power of God as long as our personal goal is to more deeply entrench our position against those who understand differently than we do. As long as we differ, it is a sign that God has further light for us that will draw us together in unity, without losing one jot or title of eternal truth. And that light cannot be revealed to us as long as we do not humble ourselves before God and each other, and plead for an experience such as the disciples had at Pentecost.

The divine prescription of the Sanctuary will lead us to that experience. Coming to God with our hearts uplifted to Him in praise, humbling ourselves before Him and giving up all animosity, suspicion, and pride of opinion, cleansing our minds with the counsels and corrections in His word, and praying in faith for the outpouring of wisdom and enlightenment of the Spirit which will fill and empower us to work together as one – this is what God is waiting for. It didn't happen in January of 1903. But Ellen White was shown a group of General Conference leaders – somewhere, sometime – who made the necessary preparation and received the treasured blessing. Why not here, why not now, why not us?

Unseen emissaries from heaven are present here with us in this room. And they have answers to all our questions, light for all our darkness, peace for all our anxiety, and healing for all our brokenness. The long-awaited fulfillment can be ours if we seek it with all our hearts. It is just a prayer away!

These words of Paul in his counsel to the Ephesian church ring down through the centuries to us this day, challenging us to reach for the highest spiritual blessings that God has to offer, for ourselves and for our church at this important time in history:

“I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” Eph. 3:16-19.

I want to point out that although knowledge is absolutely imperative, and is one of the gifts of the Spirit, if it is not accompanied by love, it is “only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” 1 Cor. 13:1. May God guide us today and every day, that as we seek for knowledge, we will remember that unless it is in harmony with the love of Jesus for every person for whom He has given His life, we cannot be a vessel that is open to the whole measure of the fullness of God.

“Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” Vs. 20,21.

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