

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 6

Inadequacy meets Sufficiency

None of us like to feel inadequate, but I suggest that a sense of our own inadequacy is actually a gift. To recognise that we have a need may be the first step in seeing that need met. Feeling our own inability or insufficiency may seem like a negative thing, when in fact it may be quite the opposite.

There is a notion in our contemporary culture that recognising our inability or insufficiency is somehow contrary to the principles of success. Self-confidence and high-powered, aggressive personalities seem to be the winners in the world today. The truth is most of us simply don't live there. We may well put on a facade in order to appear confident and assertive, but in actual fact, we often feel just the opposite. We are worried about the future; we are worried about the present; trying to balance job and family; trying to be good parents and providers, good role models, good wives and husbands. Sometimes it is really tough and many times, we just feel totally inadequate.

Imagine how the Apostles felt in the days preceding Pentecost. For several years they had really been living an awesome life with Jesus. They were following one of the most exciting figures of history. Every single day they were experiencing the miraculous; they were listening to the most insightful teacher of truth who had ever appeared on our planet. It was indeed a time for high adventure. But they had recently endured His senseless murder. Can you imagine the despair and defeat that must have gripped their hearts? But then He rose from the dead and appeared to them a number of times. What an exhilarating experience that would have been! But now they have lost Jesus again (so they thought) when He ascended to the right hand of the Father.

Jesus had challenged them with what we refer to as *The Great Commission*, but He had told them to go to Jerusalem and to wait. I'm sure they didn't quite understand what that meant. But they were waiting. As they waited, one terrible truth would have gripped their hearts. Jesus is gone! This powerful figure around whom their whole lives had been built for so long was now gone and they were alone. Certainly, they had each other, but it wasn't the same without Jesus. Just imagine how they felt.

I'm sure they had lots of questions: 'What would it be like now? Who among them could ever fill His shoes? How could they ever fulfil His Great Commission? Was this all a big dream? Was it now over?' Questions, many questions, but no answers. Whatever else they thought or felt, I am sure they felt empty. This man Who had filled their lives was gone and they were incredibly empty. This sense of emptiness is shared by many today. Even many Christians feel empty. There is something missing in their lives; something they can't quite put their finger on. But they recognise a real need. They feel the need for power in their own personal lives. They feel the need for a sense of adequacy.

I'm sure all of the Apostles felt that need, and especially one. Peter is a prime example of the spiritual pilgrimage of many Christians. He went through what many of us have gone through or are going through. Perhaps as we focus on what happened to Peter, we will see the principles behind the power which completely changed his life and can impact our lives the same way. Facing our inadequacy doesn't sound like an exciting thing to do, but in many ways it's the first step to a fulfilled life. It was for Peter. He needed it desperately and it can be a first step for us as we face our inadequacy.

Peter was a most appealing character but he was just an ordinary guy. There was nothing extraordinary about his life. He was just a fisherman. He and his father and brothers had a fishing business. Every day they went to work. Every day they faced the pressures of the marketplace. He wasn't overly educated. He didn't belong to the elite social class. He was just like you and me.

When Jesus called him, he responded. He didn't really know what that meant. He wasn't aware of all the implications of following Jesus, just as we are not aware when we come to Him. But the desire was there. He wanted to follow the Lord and, in many ways, he felt like he could follow him well. Peter was an impulsive kind of guy. He was fairly confident in his own abilities and many times he bit off more than he could chew. He had many lessons to learn, one of the most important was that Peter couldn't do it on his own.

You see, Peter had to come face to face with his own inadequacy just as we must. This was going to be essential for his future spiritual growth. We find the account in Mark 14. Jesus had been arrested and Peter follows from a distance. He is interested to see what will happen to Jesus. Peter thinks he is one of the Lord's most faithful followers, and perhaps he is. But he is about to come face to face with his own inadequacy.

Mark 14:66-72 *"While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again, he denied it.*

After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept."

Peter was headstrong and he thought he would never deny his Lord. Now he had. In fact, he had denied him three times. He didn't even have the courage to stand up before a servant girl and confess his faith in Christ. He wasn't willing to identify himself with the Saviour. How could he do such a thing? I'm sure he was filled with frustration, shame and a deep sense of failure. Disappointment was probably too weak a word. Total discouragement is far better, perhaps even despair. I'm sure these are all emotions Peter must have felt. His heart must have ached. The Scripture says that he wept bitterly.

You see, Peter had come face to face with the reality of his own inadequacy. The irony was that he truly did not want to deny his Lord. Yet, as Jesus had said only a few short hours before, *"The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."* Peter did not want to deny his Lord, yet he had. *"Oh, God, how could I have done such a thing? I said I would never deny you and I have done the very thing I said I would never do! What's the matter with me? Oh, God, I'm a failure."*

Have you ever felt that way? I'm sure you have. It's common to all of us. In our jobs, or at home, and in ministry, many times we come face to face with our own inadequacy and failure. It's not very encouraging. Additionally, we all feel a deep sense of frustration at times at our efforts to follow Jesus. Call it the frustration index if you like. The frustration index is the amount of tension we feel at the gap between what we know to do and our actual performance.

When the level of our spiritual knowledge is high, but our level of performance low, there is a tension created, a sense of frustration felt as we recognise that we are not living up to our own understanding of what God expects of us and what we expect of ourselves. Eventually, we must come face to face with our own inadequacy. Peter did, and so must we. It may be the very thing we need. Facing our own inadequacy is good for us - it prepares us for God's work in our lives.

Someone once said, "*God only fills empty vessels.*" There is a real sense in which that is true. What we may need is to come to a place of emptying in our own lives. We may need to come to a place of brokenness. That may be the very thing we need to give us the right perspective for our lives - the perspective we need in order for God to begin His work in us. That may be the preparation for our personal Pentecost. It was for the apostles and for Peter. It can be for us. Let's have another look at the opening verses of Acts chapter 2.

Acts 2:1-4 *"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."*

Only by facing our inadequacy will we truly encounter His sufficiency.

You see, that is what Pentecost was. Pentecost was an encounter with God. This is its real significance. Be careful not to miss that in the details of this dramatic story. The real significance of Pentecost is not the rushing, mighty wind or the visible tongues of fire, or even the fact that they spoke in many other languages. The real significance of Pentecost was an encounter with God. God showed up and by His Spirit, God took over. They were filled with God's Spirit and clothed with power from on high, just as Jesus had promised. Pentecost means that God is in charge.

What happened at Pentecost was a transforming event. Like the caterpillar which spins its cocoon and waits there while an inner work of transformation takes place, so the disciples were waiting as God did His unseen work in their hearts to prepare them for that day. Then as the caterpillar emerges, something wonderful has happened. He is no longer a caterpillar, but a beautiful butterfly. His life has been changed. He has been completely transformed.

On the day of Pentecost, God came down in power and changed the lives of a multitude. Like the butterfly, they would never be the same again. They didn't even act the same. They were intoxicated by the Spirit. They were doing strange things. They weren't acting like normal people. Some accused them of being drunk, and they were. They were not drunk with wine; they were drunk with the Spirit of God. They were overwhelmed by the presence and power of God.

That's precisely what we need today. That is what the Church needs today. As we embrace our insufficiency and own it, we will encounter His sufficiency and understand the dynamic of how to live. Pentecost was an encounter with the sufficiency of God. They had been emptied only to be filled. It finally had clicked; it all made sense now. They understood how to live above the level of their inadequacy. They must learn to depend upon His sufficiency. They must learn to live in His power. And that is what we need today. We need our own personal Pentecost because, as we encounter God, we will find the power to live our lives. Facing our inadequacy not only brings us to a place of encountering His sufficiency, but both taken together, produce an ability for living dynamically. Notice what happened to Peter.

Acts 2:14 *"Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say."*

Something has changed! This is a very different Peter. A few days prior to this, he could not even admit before a servant girl around a campfire that he knew Jesus. He had acted like a coward. And now, with multiplied thousands gathered together, he dares to stand up and command the attention of the entire multitude. Something has happened. This is not the Peter we knew! What has happened to this man?

Pentecost happened. Encountering God's power happened. Being filled with the Spirit happened. A transformation happened. Peter appears different because he is different. Indeed, something most definitely happened to this man. He is now operating, not in his own ability, but in God's sufficiency. He is moving by the power of God. God is in charge now. The Spirit is in control, and this is precisely what makes for dynamic, authentic Christian living. It is living in the power, the *dúnamis* of God.

Peter's cowardice had been turned into confidence and his confidence now was in Christ, not himself. He began to understand what Paul wrote later, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* This was the result of encountering the very presence of Christ. In Acts 4, we will see where Peter and John are before the religious leaders and it is said of them:

Acts 4:13 *"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."*

Encountering the presence of Jesus Christ is what will give us confidence. It is the confidence of knowing that He indwells us by His Spirit, that He empowers us by His Spirit, that He lives in us and through us by His Spirit. Indeed, it was a life-changing experience for all. On Pentecost, 3,000 came to know the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Church was born in Jerusalem. It was a dynamic Church, filled with dynamic people who were living out their Christianity in the midst of a secular society.

This is the picture of a living, dynamic fellowship of believers who are empowered by the Holy Spirit of God. These are people who have seen their own inadequacy. They have encountered the sufficiency of God and because they have been filled with His Spirit, they are now empowered to live dynamically changed lives in the midst of a society which runs counter to the principles of God's Word. It is a Church made up of ordinary people, living extraordinary lives by the power of the Spirit.

Have you come face to face with your inadequacy? Perhaps you have. Maybe you even feel it keenly today. Don't despair - there is hope. It may be just the place God has brought you to. He may be bringing you to the point where you can be filled with His grace and love and power. God fills empty vessels. If you sense your inadequacy today, come to Him and allow Him to fill you up with Himself. As you encounter His sufficiency, you will be empowered to live dynamically. You will experience the power of God just like those early disciples did.

Imagine having your heart filled with God's love, your mind full of His truth, your soul full of faith and His goodness, and having courage and boldness without fear. Imagine sensing His presence, knowing He is in the room with you, and your heart sensing His tender promptings and knowing what to say or do in your own life and in the ministry of serving others. That's what the presence of the Spirit provides for us: the privilege to be filled with God's love and to be empowered by Him with supernatural ability. The greatest need of every Christian and every Church today is a sustained consciousness of the personal presence and power of the Living God.

Like the power of a volcano pouring forth fiery lava, the power of God poured forth on the followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost around 33 A.D. Born that day was a radically new creation on earth that never existed before - the Church - born not by natural power but by supernatural power. And the power behind its existence is the Holy Spirit Who is a radical blessing to every believer and to the world - having a profound and far-reaching effect.

We can look at Peter's seemingly ordinary life and see that it was very valuable to God. His value was not because he was super-educated, wealthy, handsome, or a star athlete in the ancient world. Peter was an ordinary man who knew his weaknesses but yielded to the Spirit's transforming power to do whatever Jesus wanted him to do. He knew that he was dearly loved by His Saviour.

God made Peter to be loyal, open-hearted, and verbally gifted. He used those very traits to further His gospel message. He transformed Peter's impulsiveness, fearfulness, and tendency to be weak-willed into a man who carefully sought guidance from the Lord, trusted the Lord, and was bold in doing what Christ asked him to do. The Lord can do the same for you.

When Jesus commissioned His followers to go into the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19) that declaration was given to ordinary, everyday women and men like you and me. None of them were ordained preachers, hired Church staff, or leaders of missionary organizations. Some did extraordinary things and are written about in the book of Acts. Others were just proclaiming the good news wherever they went. Unnamed, ordinary people, speaking about Jesus to their families, friends, and neighbours in the context of their ordinary, everyday lives. They allowed the Holy Spirit to transform them into Christ's followers who resembled Christ more than their old selves. They dared to be different from their world - and God blessed that.

It's okay to be ordinary. It's okay to admit your inadequacy. God is actually attracted to weakness. He can't resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need Him. It is our weakness, our inadequacy, our emptiness which makes room for His strength and sufficiency.

Our willingness to let the Spirit control and transform us requires us to recognize that we are too weak to do anything of spiritual significance on our own. Then, He takes over and uses all the gifts He has given us for God's glory. The God of the unexpected takes every day, ordinary kinds of people like you and me and He works through our weakness, leads us to trust Him more, and surprises us with gifts from unexpected sources. God uses the ordinary and unexpected to accomplish His purposes. What a joy it is to serve Him!