

Rekindle the Fire of God in Your Life

Stephen Thompson played defensive tackle for the New York Jets during the heyday of Joe Namath. He even has a Super Bowl ring and flashes it occasionally if someone tries to intimidate him. But tackling the problem of staying in the **river of God**—the current flow of His Spirit—proved to be an even greater challenge than tackling football superstars.

After his days as a pro football player Stephen and his wife, Starla, entered the ministry. He became pastor of a church near Seattle in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, a Pentecostal denomination founded by Aimee Semple McPherson, the famous woman evangelist of the early 1900s. The denomination's Pentecostal roots, however, did not seem to prepare the members of Stephen's church for the current **move of the Spirit**.

Stephen and Starla realized they needed a **fresh touch from God** and made their way to the **outpouring** in Toronto. There they were overcome with the presence of God. He touched them in such a powerful way that they determined never again to do things at church the way they had always done them.

Once back home they instituted a Friday night **renewal** meeting, which people attended to enjoy the blessings God was pouring out. Many of their members dived into the river, eager to experience all God had for them. Then the trouble began.

Dissenting factions started to oppose the leaders of the church, and within a year the church was facing a full-scale split. "It seemed as though everyone was leaving," Stephen recalls. And those who stayed were grieving over the loss of their friends.

Although the church had problems before the renewal started,

the focus of gossip about the turmoil quickly became the church's participation in the renewal. Stephen's ability to lead was called into question, and within a few months more than half their 830 members left.

At that point Stephen and Starla were so discouraged they let go of the renewal. They stopped the Friday night meetings and tried to return everything to the way it had been before **the outpouring** started, working to please God with a good church program.

"We began to question everything we had seen," Stephen recalls. "When the church split started, we wondered if we were seeing bad fruit. Why had all this happened when the Holy Spirit was supposed to create unity in the fellowship?"

As time went by, however, the people who remained with them remained loyal to the renewal, too, and Stephen and Starla grew hungry again. They made another pilgrimage to Toronto. When they saw that God was still moving and that He had no intention of withdrawing His love and blessing, the Thompsons desired revival more than ever. But they wondered how they could ever bring their flock back into the river.

Stephen invited his friend Brad Davis, another Foursquare pastor, to speak at their family summer camp. Brad's church in Fresno, California, has been flowing in the renewal since 1994 and has become a watering hole in central California.

Brad began to preach about the kingdom of God and exhorted Stephen's church not to try to go back to the way they had been before renewal. The power of God broke out again at the camp. People who had come for "camp as usual" went home on fire. They began to experience a renewed love for Jesus. It seemed that God was dressing the wounds left by the split.

This time Stephen talked with Brad about how to get back in the river and keep the blessing. He never wanted to lose it again. Brad gave him several pointers that are applicable to

all of us who share Stephen's desire to regain and retain the blessing of revival.

Welcome the presence of God. First, Brad encouraged Stephen and Starla to welcome the presence of God. So they returned to the deeds they were doing when the river first came to their church—spending time in God's presence, waiting on Him and absorbing His love, watching Him initiate acts of power and then cooperating with Him. They began by restoring the Friday night renewal meeting.

They also invited the Holy Spirit to move any way He wanted upon the congregation. Many people had lost heart because of the church split. Stephen began to pray for them, asking the Holy Spirit to renew and touch them.

God came powerfully. He touched the people with healing miracles and renewed their spiritual strength.

Stephen may not have realized it, but he did what Jesus said to do when you realize you have left your first love: "Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent [which means 'go back'] and do the things you did at first" (Rev. 2:5, NIV). By far the principal "thing" is lingering in the presence of God and enjoying His love.

Start soaking again. Brad told Stephen, "You have to start soaking again in God's presence and teach your people to soak, too." As Stephen and Starla started soaking and experiencing the love of God again, they wanted everyone in the congregation to feel God's love. And people began to respond.

This, of all the evidences of revival, has meant more to Stephen and Starla than anything else. Stephen says that the sense of God's love is greater now that they have gotten back into the river than it was the first time they experienced revival. The congregation is growing in its love for God, which is the true purpose of church and ministry in the first place.

All this newfound love for Jesus is producing fruit, including the ministry of helping take the river to Africa. Stephen says: "Intimacy with God is the cause of fruit production. We are in transition from being a program-oriented church to a Presence-oriented church."

Set love as a priority. Last summer Stephen and Starla took a three-month sabbatical. His assistants took over the responsibilities of the church; by this time they were too busy soaking in the glory to notice that their pastor and his wife were taking some needed days off!

During this time, the Lord spoke to Stephen about rearranging his priorities. The first thing God said was not surprising: "Love Me first." The Lord gave specific instructions concerning how He wanted to be loved: He told Stephen to give Him his mornings.

Prior to this, Stephen and Starla's mornings had been a rush to get to the church and start handling the details of the day. The Lord told him that during these mornings with Him they were to spend time personally soaking in God's love, doing nothing but letting God touch them and enjoying Him. Out of their renewed communion with God, they began to fall in love with Jesus and with each other all over again.

Then God said, "Love your wife until she feels loved." Like many husbands he thought he was already doing that, but the key was "until she feels loved." After all, Stephen thought, what good is revival unless it is happening at home? Stephen started treating Starla the way he did when he was courting her. A river of new love started pouring into their marriage.

Then God said, "Love your children and your grandchildren until they feel loved." Stephen wondered how many details would have to be set aside at church to accomplish this, but he knew that obedience to God would be worth more to Him than sacrifice, so he decided to do this, too.

"If you do these things," God told Stephen, "by the time you are 70 years old, you will be going 70 miles per hour!" Stephen is in his 50s now. Before he got back in the river he had felt internally weary, drained of any motivation to continue. After six months of obeying the Lord, he knows he has found the secret of continuous personal revival: soaking in God and obeying the simple things He tells you to do.

Go into the river together. In addition to pursuing the presence of God personally, Stephen took more of Brad's advice: "Don't try to go it alone."

Brad told him to join others who are soaking constantly in the river and not to be bound by denominational lines. This would encourage Stephen and his staff that they were not in this alone, that other pastors all over the world love the river of God's presence, too. It would also "stoke the fire" that God was re-igniting in the congregation, providing another form of validation for those who were learning to trust and open up to the Holy Spirit.

Stephen invited members of the Toronto itinerant team and other pastors whose churches are being revolutionized by what God is doing to come to Seattle. Their congregation sets aside special weekends to focus on the renewal.

As congregants hear testimonies and teaching from other ministers who are also soaking in the presence of God and encouraging their congregations to do so, they realize the value of what God is sending. Signs and wonders have begun to increase in the congregation, causing deeper hunger for God.

Stephen's church is rediscovering the secret of the early church's ongoing revival. There is a direct correlation between being in awe of God's presence and continuing to see Him work: "Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles" (Acts 2:43, emphasis added).

Stephen says today: "We'll never go back to the way we were before. This is just too wonderful. It's about continually experiencing the Father's love. Before, I thought it was about seeing the outward manifestations. Perhaps I focused too much on seeing outward signs and whether or not there was enough fruit. Now I'm being drawn by His love. It's the most important thing."

People sometimes ask me, "Whatever happened to the Toronto Blessing?" Simply by asking the question those individuals show that they have walked away from the river. Maybe, like Stephen and Starla, they left out of discouragement when the presence of God brought a church split or division between friends. It is easy to understand.

But there are people like the Thompsons all over the world who are taking another look and finding the courage to return. And God will come and come more powerfully than they ever imagined because they have learned the difficult lesson of stewardship of the presence of God, and they will never let go again.

If you were once in the river but have gotten out for some reason, you can go back. Being humble enough to admit your need is the first step. Then take Brad's advice and commit yourself to welcoming the presence of God, taking time to soak in it, setting love as a priority and going into the river with others who are hungry for God.

It isn't easy, but Stephen and Starla did it and so has everyone else who began to long for what they let go of. They are finding where they set God down and returning to the blessing of a lifetime.

Read a companion devotional.

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When the Presence of God Drives You to Your Knees

I had never been “under the power” before. Now, looking up at the ceiling of the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, I wondered if this first touch from God was the beginning of revival for me.

It was Nov. 24, 1994. Over 18 years before, Bill, my husband, and I had left Texas and had gone to pastor a church in Pittsburgh with little more than a promise from God that one day a “river” would flow into our lives and out the doors of our church, watering the desert around us.

But after 18 years all we had seen was desert and no water. We had been up and down on a roller coaster of hope and disappointment.

As a steady stream of would-be parishioners came and went, the fear of abandonment only increased our pain. Feelings of failure pervaded our thought lives as we reeled in the wake of church splits. Too many nights I lay awake wondering where we had gone wrong, why had we missed God’s blessing.

Then in 1994, in the aftermath of surgery, I began to suffer from hormone shock. Panic attacks assaulted my already fragile emotions as waves of fear rolled over me. The wilderness had done its work well. I had become desperate for Jesus.

I was too numb from bracing myself against the storms of ministry to hope that this experience on the floor in Toronto

was the beginning of the fulfillment of God's long-ago promise. For more than 20 years since first being filled with the Holy Spirit, I had seen no value in what was happening to me now. I suppose I was among those children who wanted God to touch them but never expected that He would.

I had never fallen or responded outwardly to the Holy Spirit. But now, to my surprise, I was "glued" to the floor, afraid to move for fear of disrupting the sweet sense of His presence.

A flicker of hope leaped within me, along with a new sense that Jesus really loved me after all. I repented of my unbelief, jumped off the banks of apathy and dived into the river. For the first time in nearly two decades, I let God touch me.

The Holy Spirit must have accompanied us home from Toronto. The following Wednesday night my husband called the 60 or so members of our fledgling congregation together.

To our amazement the Spirit's presence began to hover over our tiny group. Spontaneously, people started to worship and weep as we told them what we had seen and experienced.

Bill promised to pray at the next service for anyone who wanted prayer. He had not been outwardly touched when he received prayer in Toronto. In fact, he had felt nothing.

He knew only what he had seen-hundreds of people, many of them pastors who had literally crawled to Toronto with the same sense of hopelessness we'd had, coming back to life with the hope that maybe, just maybe, this was real revival.

Bill kept his promise at the following service. As he reached out his hand to touch those who wanted prayer, he purposely touched them gently and then put his hands behind his back to avert any conclusions that this was somehow hyped by a heavy-handed preacher pushing would-be receivers.

The presence of God began to fall upon first one and then another of our members. These weren't strangers, as in Toronto; these were people we had known for years.

Soon the floor of our church was covered with the bodies of people responding to God in the same way we had seen in Toronto. Only none of them had ever seen Toronto! In fact, most of them had never had any outward manifestation in response to prayer before that day.

The outward signs were only the beginning. Lives began to change. Our once subdued children's pastor was instantly set free from a three-year depression as she drummed her feet on the floor and waved her arms in the air.

One of our congregation's most jovial members stood and wept loudly and openly as the Holy Spirit touched him sovereignly in a service, delivering him from a depression he had kept hidden from all of us.

Almost every member was being touched. Then healing miracles began to happen. Within a few weeks, five people had received documented healings confirmed by radiologists.

For me, however, the greatest miracle was taking place in my own once-cynical heart. I was falling in love with Jesus all over again.

Nearly four years had passed. I received prayer-mostly from ordinary people, not well-known ministers-hundreds of times in big and small churches flowing in this same river of blessing, and the sense of the Lord's presence has flourished in my life. Waves of panic have been washed away by wave after wave of His healing love.

Now the trickle has become a gushing river in my soul. It has carried me into dimensions of His love I never knew existed, as well as into foreign nations and even prisons.

In Spain I saw this river touch a Muslim man, hardened by the bruises of life. He began to shake as the Holy Spirit's presence sovereignly fell upon Him, and He turned immediately to Christ.

In England I watched a teen-age boy, unsaved and skeptical, fall to the ground under the influence of God's power, then sit up and give his life to Jesus. In prisons, I've seen laughter and spiritual drunkenness overcome once-hardened sex offenders and murderers who have then turned to Christ.

I've seen widows healed of their searing grief. I've seen hopeless addicts gradually restored to lasting sobriety through repeated doses of His soaking love. I've seen deadly tumors disappear both suddenly and gradually under repeated touches of the Holy Spirit.

But while the river is blessing multitudes, others are wondering whether or not it is God. In the beginning I, too, was a skeptic. I ridiculed this precious outpouring, despising the laughter and all I still do not fully understand.

When I saw the river's powerful restorative effects, however, I was faced with a choice. Would there ever be any substitute for that final risky leap of faith?

No. So I jumped in.

I've given myself to practically every expression of His power and love. I've unashamedly made 22 trips from Pittsburgh to Toronto to enjoy the meetings. I've received "soaking prayer" over 500 times, allowing the Holy Spirit to touch me in practically every service I've attended, both here and abroad.

Isn't this extreme? Perhaps. But how would a dying man in a scorching desert react if he suddenly happened upon a pure, deep river? Would you consider his behavior extreme if he threw himself into the waters and began to drink?

Ultimately, I decided that there are no toxic levels of the Holy Spirit. Can anyone, after all, receive too much of Jesus' love, too much of His joy, too much of His peace? Can any of us receive too much of the Father's blessing?

Some ask, "Is it renewal-or revival?" I guess that depends on how dead you were when it started!

Whatever it's called, I believe this is the beginning of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our generation. "There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God" (Ps. 46:4, NKJV)-and the river is here!

Melinda Fish *is the author of several books, including The River Is Here (Chosen/Baker Books).*