

# The Dark Night of the Spirit

Perhaps more than any other denomination, Pentecostals need to rediscover the spiritual discipline of Sabbath. I could demonstrate this any number of ways: biblically, historically, logically or even personally. But I've found the most effective way to teach this truth is the same way Jesus taught us: through stories.

A friend once told me a story, which he referred to as "the story of the flood." After purchasing their newly constructed suburban home, he and his family quickly began enjoying the benefits of living with all their new stuff—new friends, new paint, new lawn, new appliances and new faucets. Everything was new!

After nearly six months, nothing seemed to threaten their new life. That is, until one fine Tuesday, when the floorboards in the kitchen gave way to a basement brimming with a deluge of rotten water. The nightmare scenario could haunt any new homeowner: A slow, undetected water drip in the sink had slowly become a virtual cesspool under the kitchen, eventually eroding the very boards under their feet.

Something that was no more than a small problem at first ultimately destroyed even the house's foundations. No one could have predicted the impact this leak could cause. But sometimes the only way to discover what is wrong is to wait and observe.

A similar leak threatens today's Pentecostal church. Like my friend's house, Pentecostalism is still "new," historically speaking. Emerging in the early 1900s, it took the world by storm, bringing revival, evangelistic fervor and ecumenical renewal. But as my friend discovered, with anything new, problems arise. After a century of observation, we have had enough time to study the well-being of Pentecostals. The

results are in—and the diagnosis is burnout.

Nowhere is this more evident than in pastors' kids (or PKs). Over the last decade and a half, I have witnessed the real pain and anger of the children of Pentecostal pastors and ministers. I have met a generation of PKs who feel the need to deconstruct their faith and the church because of what they have seen the church do to their Pentecostal parents. In short, the church stole their parents from them.

This storyline has power to bring tears to any of us in vocational ministry. The work of ministry is so demanding, difficult and disappointing that our commitment to it is stealing us away from the little ones God has put in our lives. Our children are paying a major price for the way we embody church.

This is our slow drip, and the rot has been exposed. In many of our Pentecostal and charismatic denominations, pastoral burnout has become a virtual norm. Except now it isn't just our senior leaders who are burning out; it's our youth pastors. Time and again, we are seeing that everyone is susceptible to burnout in the structures and systems we have created.

In fact, so much of our contemporary Pentecostal culture mirrors our formative years. In my own Foursquare denomination, we are still coming to grips with the patterns of life of our founder, Aimee Semple McPherson. McPherson believed, as did her evangelical contemporaries, that "lifetime" was "working time." In her 1994 biography of McPherson, Edith Blumhofer said that attitude was the spirit of the age, like the Torrey-Alexander revival song: "Spend no idle days; work, ever work, for Jesus."

Or as John Andrews pithily observed, "Mary had a little lamb, was given her to keep. It joined the Pentecostal church and died through lack of sleep."

To further the problem, rather than dealing with the lack of health, we almost make a virtue out of burnout. We say things like "They did it for the Lord," "Man, they are committed" and "Their reward will be in heaven." So we let the drip continue, trying to sell the lie that the flood in the basement is really just a dirty pool we should accept as the real cost of following Jesus.

Pentecostals and charismatics have been awesome at renewing the world, but we have forgotten to be renewed ourselves. In short, we have ignored God's invitation to rest. And until we heed it, we will keep burning out.

## **Rest and the Bible**

My spiritual director likes to remind me, "We don't fix reality by ignoring it." Here is the reality today's church must face: What if in all the renewal, rejuvenation and revival that the Pentecostal and charismatic world has brought, we have overlooked the simple importance of rest?

For the last three years, I've sought to bring that message to churches across the country. I've fought to bring this Christian discipline back to the Pentecostal table through pastors retreats, speaking at churches, counseling pastors, radio interviews, and writing articles and even a book. Along the way, I've found that the Bible actually has a lot to say about this.

One particular theme that has stood out to me is the intersection of biblical rest and the Holy Spirit. We see this dynamic connection many times in the Bible.

For example, Isaiah the prophet described to his audience the day of vengeance when Israel would be judged, through which all things would be made right by Yahweh. In Isaiah 63:13-14, he describes God's faithful leadership of Israel: "Who led them through the deep, as a horse in the wilderness, that they should not stumble? ... The Spirit of the Lord caused them to

rest. So You led Your people to make Yourself a glorious name." God's Spirit, the one who hovered over creation, hovers over Israel, bringing them to a place of rest where they will be at peace with God and themselves.

Interestingly, it was on the Jewish day of rest—the Sabbath—that Jesus preached His first sermon—a sermon, mind you, about the Holy Spirit. In front of His hometown crowd of Nazareth, Jesus proclaims, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:18a). On the day of rest, Jesus reveals His identity as the Spirit-anointed Messiah who came to bring the year of Jubilee to the world.

Peter picks up on this same theme of the Spirit and rest. This time, we see it from a different angle. In the context of the baby church suffering as the result of persecution and cultural marginalization, Peter writes, "But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Pet. 4:13-14, NIV). This time, rather than describing the Spirit who will give us rest, we find the Spirit resting on the church. Again, rest and the Spirit—together.

This theme of the Spirit "resting on" the church, no doubt, harkens back to the post-creation story of Noah. In Genesis 9, a raven was sent out to find dry land. It could not. There was no place to rest for the bird in the old creation. But soon Noah sent out another bird—the dove—to search out a suitable place to rest. It never returned, the implication of which is that it did find a place to rest—in the new creation.

This is the key to understanding the baptism of Jesus, whereupon the Spirit rested upon Jesus with the accompanying words of affirmation from the Father: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Matt. 3:17b, MEV). The Spirit

can't land on the old creation of sin and death, but only on the new creation of life and redemption. As the Spirit rested on Jesus in His baptism, so the Spirit rests on the new creation of the church today.

The connections continue. Acts 16, for example, sees Paul approaching Bithynia, a region in modern-day Turkey where the gospel had yet to be proclaimed. The harvest was plentiful. No one had preached there. Yet Paul's missionary venture was soon disrupted: "When they came near Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not allow them" (Acts 16:7).

Imagine Paul's consternation and even anger. Souls hung in the balance. The door of ministry was wide open. And as he was about to go in, the Spirit said no. Not this time. Not here. Not now.

As my preaching hero Roy Hicks Jr. used to say about walking in the Spirit, "Not every need represents God's will in my life."

I even find it interesting that the Pentecostal and charismatic practice of being "slain in the Spirit" connects the coming of the Spirit on a particular person with them being rendered flat on their face before the Lord. Like Paul in Acts 9, the work of the Spirit does not always immediately send us out into the world. Before that can happen, we must first be broken down before the Lord.

### **The Spirit's Inward Work**

One of the primary draws of the Pentecostal and charismatic movement is the power and proclamation of mission that Pentecostalism has brought to the table. It certainly has been for me. And that's not a problem. The problem has been an overemphasis on the outward work of the Spirit, to the ignorance of the work of the Spirit inside of us.

When I want to learn about mission and miracles, I go to Jack

Hayford, McPherson and Bethel. But if I am honest, when I want to learn about spiritual formation and character development, I find myself going to Dallas Willard, Richard Foster and the Catholics.

We need both—mission and power as well as character formation and discipleship. It was Martin Luther, in his theology of the doctrine of revelation, who sought to separate out “general revelation” from “special revelation.” General revelation—what Luther called “left-handed” knowledge of God—was that knowledge that God made available to the whole world. Special revelation—or “right-handed” knowledge—was the knowledge God shared about His character in context to His covenant people. I call them God’s “outside voice” and “inside voice.”

To draw a parallel, Pentecostalism has marvelously modeled the left hand of the Spirit—the work of the Spirit out there in the world. We do mission, empowerment and the miraculous like no one else. But in so doing, we have overlooked the right-handed work of the Spirit—the work of the Spirit inside each of us. When we search our own hearts, that is what we yearn for, isn’t it? We want to walk in Holy Spirit power in this world, all the while being deeply formed by the Spirit in our body, soul and spirit. We want to become sanctified into wholeness as integrous, emotionally-healthy individuals.

Why can’t these go together?

Practicing a day of rest every week does just that. Taking a day of Sabbath rest every week will not distract us from ministry. Sadly, too many believers often think it does. I’d be a millionaire if I could count the number of times I’ve heard well-intentioned Pentecostals say, “I shouldn’t take a day of rest because the devil never rests.” My response to this? “That’s precisely why he is the devil. He’s beyond exhausted.”

That is the problem with evil: It does not know how to rest.

When Jesus cast out the woman's demons, He was clear: "When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it" (Matt. 12:43, NIV). There is no room for rest for the demonic.

I know that might sound somewhat comical, but it is really at the heart of the matter. We need to learn from Jesus: Resting is actually the way we become aware (in a dynamic way) of the power of God within us.

In John 4:1-26, Jesus sits by a well. His disciples have run off to get some food. John tells us, "Jacob's well was there. Jesus, therefore, being exhausted from His journey, sat down by the well. It was about [noon]" (v. 6, MEV). Jesus gets tired. And sits. He does nothing. Then a woman comes to the well, and Jesus has a conversation with her about the kingdom of God. She experiences His message and eventually becomes the first missionary in John's Gospel.

In this story, God's mission takes place as Jesus takes a rest and sits by a well. He welcomes a woman into His rest, and she immediately experiences the grace of God's kingdom. The Sabbath provides space in our schedules to waste time with others and, just like Jesus, minister out of our rest.

In *Working from a Place of Rest*, Tony Horsfall powerfully writes about how the posture of rest opens us up to the Spirit within us and the needs of the people around us: "Everything that happens in this story happens because Jesus was doing nothing. ... We can learn to work and minister as Jesus did, from a place of rest."

We should even keep in mind what Jesus is doing right now. Jesus is sitting at the right of the Father, simply trusting the work of the Spirit in the world that is drawing all into their courtroom. God's rest is always more effective than man's work.

**Space for the Spirit**

The number of times God's people in the Bible are given space should astound us. Most of Abraham's life wasn't worth including in the Bible. Israel walked in the desert for 40 years. Paul went to his hometown for three quiet years after his conversion. Almost nothing is written about the first 30 years of Jesus' life. All the biblical characters had lots and lots of downtime, obscurity and mundanity.

To our own detriment, the modern world has been sanitized of any kind of downtime. We don't rest anymore for one day each week on the Sabbath. We don't have time to process the news for a day before the newspaper comes again tomorrow. We don't even have a few precious moments in the bathroom anymore—we find ourselves texting with our few minutes of respite. In fact, it's so bad that a friend texted me while I was writing this: "There's a guy in this coffee shop sitting at a table, not on his phone, not on a laptop, just drinking coffee, like a psychopath." I couldn't help but laugh out loud. This is our world now.

We can all start to see the consequences of a world without rest. Something tragic is lost when we no longer give space to the Spirit to open us up to what the Spirit is saying in our lives. Something is lost when we turn busyness and numerical growth into the initial sign of the evidence of the Holy Spirit. Something is lost when busyness is the virtue of maturity. We are lost when we no longer have time to simply walk around the Garden of Eden with God one day a week.

As I reflect on all of this, I find myself drawn back to Jesus' baptism. There, on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus will be anointed by the Spirit for public ministry. The dove found a place to rest—on the head of the new creation who was breaking into the world.

I find it somewhat telling that in Mark's account of the Spirit's descent on Jesus, the next thing to come down upon Jesus was a very sick man, the paralytic. In Mark 2:1-12, men



climb onto the roof of a home to lower down a man who could not walk. Mark 1 is the Spirit coming down upon Jesus. Mark 2 is a sick man coming down upon Jesus.

As I think about that, I think about how often I try to do the work of ministry—of healing, preaching and binding—all on my own strength. I try to do Mark 2 without ever having done Mark 1. But we don't get to reverse the order. Acts 2 (Pentecost) can only come after Acts 1 ("waiting" for Pentecost). Without waiting, we aren't ready for the work of ministry. We become so excited to go out and do the work that we forget the work of God inside us. And that is what Sabbath offers: a chance for God to do something within us before He works through us.

The Sabbath is a dark night of the Spirit. It is going into the dark to find the work of the Spirit before we go out to do the work of the Spirit. It is the Mark 1 before Mark 2. It is the Acts 1 before Acts 2. And we are so desperate for it. It is the slow and patient that comes before the spontaneous and the miraculous, the contemplation that comes before the activism.

Pentecostalism taught me about the outward forms of the Christian life—how to share the gospel, preaching, miracles. For that, I am deeply grateful. But I had to go elsewhere to learn how to go deep. Pentecostalism taught me about mission, but formation had to come elsewhere. As Pentecostalism begins to reflect on what it has become nearly a century after its birth, it is a good time to reflect on who and what we want to be in the next century.

I, for one, am hungrier for the Spirit than I ever have been. And I can't imagine that hunger being satisfied by having more on my calendar. {eo}

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