

Keep Your Heart Ablaze

✘ *Passionate zeal for God has to be stirred up in order to stay hot.*

Have you ever worked hard to build a fire, only to have it go out? Although I was raised in a log cabin with five fireplaces, I never learned to build a fire that would last. One of those fireplaces is in my mother's bedroom. When I go home, I invariably find her sitting in her overstuffed chair by the window with a roaring fire on the hearth. As we sit and visit, the fire dies down, and she frequently reminds me to "stir up the fire, Anne," or "put another log on it."

You and I can experience the thrilling fire of personal revival, but if we neglect that fire, it will die out. And nothing is more miserable than a heart that has grown cold, chilling a life that once knew the raging warmth of a passionate relationship with Jesus. Not only does a heart that's grown cold make us miserable, but it makes Him miserable too. It grieves the Lord.

Speaking to the Ephesian church through the apostle John, Jesus explained: "'I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. ... You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love'" (Rev. 2:2-4, NIV). Jesus loves you and me, and He longs to be loved—really loved—by us in return.

STIRRING MY FIRE

For 12 years I taught a weekly Bible class of 500 women in our city. I never missed a class. During that time, through the disciplined study of His Word, God gave me a wonderful love for Jesus. At the end of those 12 years, I knew with absolute certainty God was calling me to leave the class and go into an itinerant, Bible-teaching ministry. I left the class and went

out into the world. Literally.

Three months later I found myself in Fiji helping to lead a conference of 500 pastors who had come in from other islands for miles around. Five months later I was in Brazil leading another conference for approximately 1,500 pastors and evangelists from all over the country and squeezing in a youth conference of more than 2,000 young people. In between Fiji and Brazil, I was teaching in seminars and conferences every week in the United States.

Gradually I became aware that I was having to drag myself into my quiet time, that my heart no longer seemed to be uplifted in worship, and that I didn't feel any real joy, but I thought I was just tired. I thought I must have been suffering from prolonged jet lag along with time and food changes.

One morning, in my devotions, I read Revelation 2—and sensed, in my heart, Jesus speaking to me: “Anne, I know your deeds. I know all about Fiji and the extra sessions that were dumped on you that you accepted because of your commitment to Me. I know all about Brazil and the women's sessions you booked into your free time because of your heart to get others into My Word.

“I know your hard work and your perseverance. I know you have endured hardships in My name and have not grown weary. Thank you, Anne, for all you are doing to serve Me. Yet I hold this against you: You are losing your love for Me.”

When I came to verse four, I kept on reading. I knew He couldn't be speaking to me! After all, I was traveling around the world telling others how to love Him! Surely He wasn't speaking to me! But He was!

He kept drawing my attention back to those verses until I finally listened to what He had to say. I would have denied it and vehemently argued, except it was Jesus who was speaking to me. And I knew that whenever He speaks, it's the truth.

Finally, the light of His Word penetrated my delusion. I acknowledged that I wasn't just tired; I was losing my love for Him! I cannot tell you how devastatingly painful that revelation was to me. I yearned to love Him, and I thought I did. But He did not agree.

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I asked, "Lord, what would You have me do?" He replied from Revelation 2:5. "'Remember the height from which you have fallen.'" Remember what it was like to love Me with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. I remembered. That love was the "height" in my relationship with Christ. And when I lost it, it was a long way down.

Then, still from verse five, He said, "'Repent.'" Repentance means to stop it: stop going in one direction, turn around and go in the opposite direction. Since a "first love" is an emotional, affectionate, passionate love, and because emotions really can't be controlled or dictated, I responded: "Lord, how? I want to repent of losing my first love for You, I want to stop not loving You emotionally and affectionately and passionately. But how? I am willing to repent, but I don't know how."

Again, He spoke to me from verse five, "Return to the things you did at first." And I answered: "What things? Things I did when I was first born again? Things I did when I first began to serve You?"

Although I had been having times of daily Bible reading and prayer, although I enjoyed fellowship with other believers and was serving the Lord, I was not spending time in concentrated Bible study on my own. I had been traveling around, giving out messages that had been previously prepared, and I had studied nothing new and fresh for months.

The fire in my heart was burning dangerously low because it didn't have enough fuel. Before that day was out, I got my

Bible, picked up my pencil and a legal pad, and began to do an in-depth study of His Word. Within a week of my repentance and obedience, my joy and passionate love for Him returned, and within a short time, it was rekindled into a roaring blaze. I had added logs to my fire, and you can do the same.

LOGS OF REVIVAL

The Bible tells us to “fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Tim. 1:6). That gift is the Holy Spirit, who is the fire of God, igniting our relationship with Jesus. Your fire will go out also, if you neglect to stir it up and keep putting the logs on it. Here’s how to get started:

Talk to Him. What kind of a year, or month or week have you had? Has it been physically exhausting, emotionally depleting, spiritually draining, financially challenging? Do you long to just sit down and talk to someone about it? Someone who is a wise, caring, attentive listener? Someone with integrity, who can keep confidences? Someone who won’t silently smirk at your stupidity or ignorance but will actually love you while patiently listening?

There are times my heart aches to have someone to talk to about you. So I carve out time to get alone, curl up in my easy chair by the fire, and imagine Jesus sitting there in another chair opposite me. And I just talk to Him. That is the privilege we call prayer.

I begin with worship, which leads into confession of sin, a private exchange between God and me. Following a time of confession, I think my heart would burst if I couldn’t give voice to my praise for all He has done for me, so I thank Him. Then I give voice to my requests for others and myself.

I never cease to be amazed that Jesus invites us to come into His Father’s presence, to crawl up into His lap by faith, to feel His loving arms of protection around us, and to pour out our hearts.

Listen to Him. For some, hearing God speak is like a quiet knowing. For others, it's more electric—as though the verses had bells, whistles and flashing neon lights. Regardless of how His voice sounds to you, the impact will be like fuel that keeps the fire burning in your heart. Over the years, I've developed a way to read God's Word so that I more clearly hear His voice speaking to me personally through the pages of the Bible.

(1) Begin by reading a brief passage of Scripture (two to eight verses). Read God's Word prayerfully, objectively, thoughtfully, attentively. The object of this devotional exercise is not to get through a passage, or even to study a passage, but to maintain the fire of revival in your heart as you hear from Him.

(2) Make a verse-by-verse list of the outstanding facts as you see them in the passage. Pinpoint the most obvious facts. Do not paraphrase or put His words into your own, but use the actual words from the passage itself. Leave out secondary details and start with the nouns and verbs.

(3) Go back to the list of facts and look for a lesson or spiritual principle to learn in each fact. Ask yourself: "What are the people in this passage doing or not doing that I should be doing or not doing? Is there a command I should obey? A promise to claim? A warning to heed? An example to follow?"

(4) Take the lessons or principles from step three and put them in the form of a question you could ask yourself, your spouse, your child, a friend, a neighbor, or a co-worker. Then listen for God to speak to you personally through His Word.

This is the most meaningful step, the one in which I so frequently hear God's voice. But you cannot do step four until steps one, two and three are completed.

If you're someone who has trouble settling down and waiting

quietly to hear the still, small voice of God, don't be discouraged. It takes awhile to develop this ability to focus single-mindedly so that everything else around you seems to temporarily fade away.

The more time you spend in this prayerful, meditative, listening mode, the clearer God's voice will become. Greater understanding will come to you as you meditate and open your mind to His Spirit.

(5) Listen for God to speak to you through the passage. He may not speak to you through every verse, but He will speak. When He does, record the verse number, what it is He seems to be saying to you and your response to Him. You may wish to note the date as a means of keeping a journal and to hold yourself accountable to an obedient response.

HEAR HIS VOICE

My friend Thomas told me that when he was a young boy, a very well-meaning neighborhood woman had forced him, along with her son and other playmates, to read the Bible and memorize Scripture. He described how his active little body much preferred running and jumping, throwing a ball and biking and hiking. The forced Bible-reading sessions produced an aversion to the Scriptures that carried over into his adulthood.

He described going back, in his mind's eye, to the living room of the neighborhood woman. But this time Jesus was there, beckoning Thomas to join Him in the big, overstuffed chair by the bay window. As Jesus held out His arms, Thomas imagined himself climbing up into His lap. Then Jesus opened up the Bible and began to read to him.

With eyes filled with the thrill of discovery, Thomas looked at me and exclaimed: "Anne, the Bible is His Word! It's living! I love it! Now I can't read it enough!"

Like Thomas, have you had an aversion to reading the Bible? Have you thought it was boring or irrelevant or confusing?

Then I want to invite you to climb up into the Lord's lap and let Him "read" it to you. Hearing His voice within its pages will transform your aversion into a lifetime of joyful discovery and keep you seeing .

God has given you and me the fire of the Spirit with all of His passionate energy and love for Jesus. If you neglect daily prayer and Bible reading, the fire that has been kindled in your heart will flicker and go out. You are the keeper of the fire. Don't let it die!

Read a companion devotional.

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Editor's Note: *This article was originally published in June 2007 before Anne's mother, Ruth Bell Graham, passed away.*