

# Return to the River

✖ *If you were once in the river of God but have gotten out, you can go back. Here's how.*

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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