

FRESH COMMITMENT

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Three weeks ago I began a series that would lead us in praise of Jesus Christ toward Easter Sunday. As I was praying about the direction for this Sunday earlier in the week I felt again that for one more Sunday I should lay aside the series which had been begun – we'll resume it next Sunday the Lord willing. But I could not help this week but have continually before my mind the picture of this whole front area filled with people who had come forward in commitment to Jesus Christ. Some of you came forward for the first time in your life to make a commitment to the Lord. I spent last night with our young people up in the mountains. Some of them made fresh commitments to Jesus Christ in this service last week. Some of you perhaps made a rededication of your life to the Lord.

As that thought and imagery was held before my mind in prayer I felt especially evoked in my spirit to talk about the theme of *now what?* I found that when I make a commitment of my life to Jesus Christ and come forward and stand at an altar I have the experience of "Lord, I wish I could just stay here. It feels so good. It is so right. You're doing such a work in my life." Like Peter and James and John on the mount of transfiguration I want to say, "Lord, let us build a shelter and stay here for a while."

The Lord unfortunately has this idea that we need to go back in the valley and live for him in the plains of the world.

So when we come forward and make a commitment what is to be expected? What counsel could I give you as your brother in the Lord? What counsel could I give you as your pastor?

I want to give you three words of counsel. Three sentences of counsel in respect to making a commitment to the Lord. We'll call this message "Fresh Surrender."

My first word of counsel is this: watch out for the wilderness experience.

What is the wilderness experience? One of the great examples of it is the baptism of our Lord Jesus. The coming out of purity, comes to John, is baptized. As he is baptized the heavens are open, the Spirit of God descends upon him as a dove and a voice speaks from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." An incredibly special moment in the life of our Lord.

That didn't happen at your baptism and it didn't happen at mine. The heavens did not open. The Spirit did not descend as a dove and the Father did not speak from heaven. Although I think inwardly he is speaking and inwardly the heavens are open.

But it was special with the Lord. But immediately Mark's gospel says, "Immediately after that the Spirit drove him into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness forty days fasting, tempted by Satan and he was with the wild beasts." Forty days. No voice from heaven. No "I'm well pleased with you." No dove descending. No supernatural anything. Just sand and Satan. Hardship. Beasts. Rigor. Hunger. Thirst. Alone in the wilderness. The Lord himself in his experience followed a time of great high moment with a time of rigorous testing.

FRESH COMMITMENT

The same experience happened to the ancient people of God in the Old Testament. They are freshly out of Egypt. Freshly through the Red Sea. Water standing on either side of them and then within three days in the wilderness they're out of water. Within 45 days they're out of food.

Why do these wilderness experiences happen?

They happen because what God is seeking to do in our lives is consolidate his work in us. And help us know that the commitments we make are something far deeper than a spur of the moment emotional response. But that with that commitment comes a testing.

The New Testament, especially Paul's epistles are great on the use of the word "approved." Unfortunately in the English it doesn't have quite the same drama that it has in the Greek. But it stood for a product that was tested and after having a scrupulous test the product passed the inspection. That's what wilderness experiences are meant to do in our life – to produce us as approved.

I'd like to tell you with all my heart that when you make a commitment to the Lord that you're not going to have a wilderness experience. I don't necessarily say it's going to happen overnight. I'm not saying this either because I have a masochistic streak in me and we ought to be punished when we make a commitment to the Lord. There's nothing to do with that at all. But I'll tell you when we make a fresh surrender of our lives to Jesus Christ it's like military terms, coming up from R&R and again getting in front line duty where the bullets are flying.

Peter says this "Do not be surprised at the painful or fiery trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ." Tremendous thing, by the way, about a wilderness experience is God has set a limit to it. It won't last forever. So if you're in the wilderness and it's freshly following this spiritual commitment don't think that that wilderness experience is going to last interminably. It's not. Jesus was here forty days – it ended! Israel was only meant to be in the wilderness about a year and it was to be over. But they disobeyed in the wilderness. The storm at sea was only meant to last a few hours, to test the disciples faith and then it was over. Wilderness experiences end.

I've often found it's the case that after I've preached some of my greatest sermons I am most assailed with depression to realize that the pattern of attack going on against me. Heroes are not made in peace time. Heroes are not made in luxury gardens. Heroes are made in battle.

A real key in the scripture for me has been the wise men who in the east saw his star and then began to act upon what had happened. We know from the scriptural records that the star disappeared from their view because months or maybe even a couple of years later when they finally needed it and had done all they could and then had to come to a dead stop, the star finally reappeared.

I think that's so much like the spiritual life. When you make a fresh surrender, a fresh commitment to the Lord it's like the heavens, there's a star there and all of a sudden you've got direction again. You know where you're going. You know what God's called you to do and with all your heart you want to serve him. Then there is a certain sense in which the star is withdrawn. The emotion drains out. It's back to the workaday world. It's back to school. It's back to the crush of schedule and duty.

FRESH COMMITMENT

What God wants us to do at that point is keep on the line we started when we saw the star. And when we've gone as far as we can and the star is no longer giving us direction then God reappears some way to us to keep us moving. Don't think every minute of your Christian life is going to be a moment in which you're really juiced up spiritually and emotionally and always on a high. It'd be wonderful if that could be the case. Some are given unique manifestations of the Spirit in this regard. But sometimes we slough it through in the wilderness. And God wants us to follow him in obedience at that point and keep going. So don't be surprised at the wilderness. That's counsel number one.

You all know that. This is restating something we all know which sometimes preaching should do that. Simply rehearse before us what God is at work doing in our lives.

The second word of counsel I would give to you is this: get ready for a spiritual stretch.

That's positive. Boy, is that positive! It's saying that after a spiritual commitment, the Lord is going to open up in your life one or more areas that you'll have a chance to get a breakthrough in and run way ahead of what you thought you were capable of doing.

I'd see it in the football imagery. A fullback at work the whole game, meeting that defensive line and they've been pounding him the whole game. All of a sudden his play is called and he runs to the line and he manages to get through a hole in the line. Suddenly he's in open field. That is the time to turn on the energy and race toward the goal line. That's the time to put it on!

There are moments in our life spiritually when God says you've broken through the defensive line. Now run as fast as you can! You've been struggling with really making the scripture living in your life. It's been a duty to read the scripture. Suddenly you meet with the Lord, there's a fresh love for the word of God in your heart. Run as fast as you can. Soak in as much as you can. Take as much as you can.

The same with prayer. Same with exercising a spiritual gift. Same with the difficulty many of us have with respect to witnessing. Suddenly God opens the door. Go as far as you can through that door.

I believe on the natural level as well as on the spiritual level we're far more capable of doing things than we sometimes imagine.

Five weeks ago I began a speed reading course. Five weeks later in this course I am reading at a rate that if you'd have told me five weeks ago I could read at that rate with comprehension I'd have said you're wrong. But with some practice I'm reading at five times the rate I was reading five weeks ago. With better comprehension. I'm now beginning to believe I might be able to read 20 times as fast. I'm pushing it. I've learned speed reading isn't skim reading either. You see as much but you see it in a different way. It's been astounding.

I think there are things like that that happen to us spiritually. Things we never dreamed were possible in our life God will open up and they become possible. You look at yourself and say, I don't believe I'm doing it.

I used to think that spiritual growth was a straight line. But how do you get from here to there? Many of us in the back of our subconscious live with that idea. I've found that there are many

FRESH COMMITMENT

ways you grow spiritually. My way is sudden spurts. I've found that when I grow spiritually – I inch forward then sort of snap back like a rubber band. My new low is higher than my last high. If it's lower it's not much. It's a progressive growth in the Lord. We don't grow in straight lines.

Often the stretch experience happens when we're taking on an obstacle. Balance-counterbalance. Force-anti-force kind of thing. Hardship has its good effect.

I believe the same thing happens in our life spiritually. Give us an obstacle. As we're growing in God we develop a compensating reach for it. We cannot measure our spiritual progress by being tied to somebody else. If God's calling you to run, go for it. Don't look around to see whether another person is breaking through or not. Your responsibility and privilege before God is to get into the open field and stretch.

The first two counsels – watch out for the wilderness, get ready for stretch.

I sense God putting us in a stretching experience of the church the last six weeks. He has stretched in worship. There's been adaptiveness and reflexiveness and flexibility in this body that I've seen happening. Let's go as far as we can. Who knows? Wouldn't it be wild if the dream that God has put in our heart for this whole body came to pass and we were able to evangelize this whole area. If the Lord tarries, by the year 2000 see a hundred churches sprung out of this body. I only had 24 scheduled to the year 2000. That's what I'm dreaming. God wants us to go with faith.

Third way to go, find a need and meet it faithfully.

That's the consolidation of spiritual growth. Picture with me a great rushing river. All that water doesn't do any good unless it divides off into streams, the streams divide off into rivulets, the rivulets find their way to irrigation canals. And ultimately the water gets down to one little row. The moving of God's Spirit across a whole body of people will not have any effect unless it gets into our row, our home, our track, our work, our school and somehow find its place of ultimate destination there.

Picture a great rain. It all runs off unless it is conserved and channeled into what God is doing. You and I cannot do everything but with God's help we can do something. Underline faithful. Find a need and meet it faithfully.

I don't know what that need will be. It may be a need in the church. We always in the body of Christ have need for workers. There are people who say, "I'm going to a smaller church. You have so many workers in this church I don't think I'm needed." That's a lie. That's not the truth. We have all kinds of needs.

But there's more than the needs within this body. There are needs in the community as well. God's called us to serve in one or the other or both. Faithfully.

I'm not going to be so foolish to tell you, Look around. Make up your mind about a need and exercise the willpower and go do it. I've had more frustration in my Christian life because I've tried to turn on my willpower. Sometimes I turn it on and the motor was running but the car was in neutral.

FRESH COMMITMENT

When your will and your imagination meet in conflict your imagination almost always wins. That's Paul's line in Romans 7 "What I would I do not." In a time of commitment the Spirit vitalizes our imagination so that what we do for Christ becomes more than just putting our will power to work. The Lord exposes within us possibilities and we begin to see and therefore makes it easier for our willpower to fit into it.

I don't want to on Sunday mornings get up and preach twice because that's what the pastor's supposed to do on Sunday morning. I want to see God at work. In a place of service catch an image of what God can do through you. It's never too late to begin. And you can always begin early, too. When you are involved in some faithful place of service you're going to grow. God does not let spiritual growth happen to people who aren't doing anything. He never promotes anyone who's doing nothing.

When you make a commitment to the Lord if you don't become involved in faithful Christian service what's going to happen is you're going to be like the person who the seed falls on the ground and it springs up among thorns and cares and other things and choke out the potential.

God one day appeared to Moses. Called him to do something special. Moses protested, "I'm not the person." That's often the way we feel when God asks us to do something. It's an ordinary response of all of us.

God said, no I don't. God doesn't have the wrong person when he calls you to do something. He says to Moses, "What is in your hand?" God takes the stick and with it parts waters and does miracles. God takes whatever we have in our life if we'll honestly give it to him. God will do some very marvelous things with that.

Find a place where you will serve the Lord and serve his church in this world faithfully.

Lord, you're able to do in us exceedingly and abundantly above what we ask or seek. There were so many that responded last week in coming forward and expressing their love and commitment to you. There were others that right where they were standing at their places made that commitment in their heart. Others wish they had and did not. The invitation is open today. For all of those who expressed that commitment to you that perhaps have already done things this past week that have come to them to sort of jar away that experience from their treasure of possessions Lord, I pray that you will fortify each of us, strengthen each one of us. You put many people going on new courses last week. You're doing it again today. We want to hear your word. We want to obey it. We want to do more than be people who simply come and are challenged. Lord, we want your Spirit to work in us to internalize, to consolidate and to cause to grow your kingdom in us. Lord, let each person here today, may each commitment be attended by a special sense of your presence. Give those going through wilderness experience a witness within their own heart that this too shall pass. And it will pass leaving them stronger, more vital secure in their faith, feet on firmer ground, solid in their walk that glory is going to come from it. For suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character brings hope and hope does not disappoint us. Others have chained themselves to room size expectations when you want them to get out of the stifling enclosure they're in and look at the stars and believe that you can cause them to go further and faster and deeper in the Spirit and with their own persons than ever they dreamed possible. Lord, bless dreams and visions. You promised that in the

FRESH COMMITMENT

last days your young men and young women and old men and old women would all see dreams and have visions. Lord, if there are elderly people in here that have reached the point in life that they're just sort of sitting back and have gone kind of stale in their own experience. Lord, we pray for our dear moms and dads in the Lord that they would have a great sense that you're at work in them and can do far more in the next few years in their lives than you've ever done in all the years preceding it. If you'll cause that dream to come to young and old as well, that you'll put your fire and your dream within us. Then, Lord, as we intensify that commitment by finding a place of service there are so many temptations that would take us away from serving you and one another. But, Lord, I pray that the commitments made will result by the power of your Spirit in serving faithfully you, your body and this world. We know, Lord, that you're at work through this prayer. This prayer is in your will. And it is in your good pleasure to fulfill it as we agree together. In the name of Christ. Amen.