

(# 1) Spiritual Leadership – So What’s That?!?

(Paulo Johnson, Amazon Focus, COD Men’s Retreat – October, 2018)

Guys: I hope you came with “Anticipation!” We’re going to have some fun this weekend, and it starts tonight! “Fun” is the “enjoyment of pleasure!” What greater pleasure is there, than hanging out with God and His guys, and doing things together with Him?

Someone has also said: *“Fun is an experience .. often unexpected & informal!”* God just might speak to you in *“unexpected ways”* this weekend, as we get *“really informal”* with one another! *Are you ready for that? Are you willing to “open yourself up, to whatever God wants to say to you?”*

The Theme this weekend is: *“Spiritual Leadership – Stepping Up – Not Checking Out!”* The first thing that strikes me is: *Let’s look inside! .. Let’s be honest with our “Personal History!” Have you been Stepping Up? .. Or have you mostly been “Checking Out?”* I don’t want to hear it! Your neighbor doesn’t want to hear it! *But God does want to hear it! Where ARE we tonight? “You can’t make Progress, until you first establish: Where are you now?”*

The core question for the weekend?: Have I become satisfied with Mediocrity? Are you subtly stuck in a Rut? A rut is a coffin with the ends kicked out! It resembles death! (Let’s pray)

So what *IS* Spiritual Leadership anyway? It would likely help us considerably *“if we had at least some idea as to what we’re talking about,”* right? For example: *One would assume that Pastors & church leaders would be “astute & very spiritual” with what’s written in Bulletins & church communications! But apparently, that’s not always the case! Let me read for you some “real entries” from Church Bulletins across the Country:*

1. Don’t let worry kill you off .. let the Church help! *(If worry doesn’t kill you .. we will!)*
2. Charlene Mason sang the song: *“I will not pass this way again”* .. giving obvious pleasure to the congregation! *(“We won’t be seeing any more of her, thank the good Lord!”)*
3. A *“bean supper”* will be held on Tuesday night in the Church hall .. Music will follow!
4. The Sermon topic tonight is *“What is Hell?”* .. Come early & listen to our choir practice!
5. Sermon title this morning?: *“Jesus Walks on the Water!”* .. Sermon tonight?: *“Searching for Jesus!”*

Well, maybe the kids can provide us *greater wisdom & leadership than the Pastors & Bulletin writers, Amen?!?* Some young children were asked the following questions .. here are their answers:

1. *What do most people do on a Date?* .. Lynette – age 8 – says: *“Dates are for having fun .. and you can get to know one another! .. Even boys have something to say .. if you listen long enough!”* Martin – age 10 – says: *“On the first date .. they just tell each other lies .. and that usually gets them interested enough to have a second date!”*
2. *How do you make a Marriage work?* .. Ricky – age 10 – says: *“You tell your wife that she looks pretty .. even if she looks like a Truck!”*
3. *How can a stranger tell is two people are married?* .. Derrick – age 8 – says: *“You might have to guess .. based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids!”*

So, the *“Big Question”* .. this evening is: *“What is Spiritual Leadership anyway?”* Tonight will be the *only* session that will be somewhat *“Interactive,”* so speak up & share, okay?

But, first of all, Webster tells us the word *“leading”* means: *“To guide .. To persuade .. To go in front & show the way .. To play a principal role!”* It begs the question: *“How many of US .. had a Guide? .. a Persuader? .. Someone who “went in front of us & showed the way?” .. Someone who played a “Principal Role” in our lives? .. In our upbringing? .. In our maturation process?”* .. *(So many men had no one!)*

Here are some questions I want you to ponder and respond to, okay?

{1} What kind of leaders (good, bad or ugly) impacted your life? .. When you think of a Leader .. what do you envision? .. What does a Leader look like & act like? .. What attributes should leaders embody?

{2} What do spiritual leaders do? .. What is their function & purpose?

{3} At the COD .. who “can & should be” .. the spiritual leaders? .. {Just the Pastors & Elders?} .. Who else needs to function as a Spiritual Leader? (ALL of us!!)

God’s “Model of Leadership” is obviously the supreme example! When David cries out in Psalm 25, he clearly expresses the kind of leadership God is known for: “Show me your ways, O Lord! .. Teach me your paths! .. Guide me in your truth & teach me! .. For you are God my Savior .. and my hope is in you .. all day long!”

If you want to emulate “God’s Leadership Methods” .. David clarifies 4 ways to do so:

(1) Show others .. God’s Ways! .. (2) Teach others .. His Paths! .. (3) Guide others .. in His Truth! ..

(4) Lead others .. to fully Hope in God their Savior! (Ways, Paths, Truth, Hope)

There are many “components & qualities” of good leadership! But I only want to mention 2 tonight .. because to me, they’re the most important ones! .. Why? .. Because I find them “front & center” .. in the lifestyle & Mode of Operation .. of Jesus Himself!

I believe the two greatest qualities of leadership are: To Influence & To Inspire! It’s not Title .. Position .. Power .. Fame .. Control .. Authority .. Dominance .. Quality Management! Has it ever occurred to you that your Primary Role is to Influence & Inspire others? Jesus “influenced people” more than anyone who ever lived! And, check this out! The product of His influence was that “He Inspired people” to become all that God intended them to be! The only reason we’re here today? .. 2 words! .. “Inspired Disciples!”

These two “qualities” .. are the “Motivational Drivers” in my life! .. They’re absolutely amazing & wonderful! To Invest in other people .. to Influence them .. to Inspire them to seek out & follow the Holy Spirit .. and to Fulfill the incredible plan God has for them? Are you serious? There nothing like it on the planet! You want to belong to something amazing? Want to be fulfilled? Want to be excited about your life? (Here it is! .. Influence & Inspire!)

So, if we All CAN be spiritual leaders .. and if we All SHOULD be spiritual leaders .. then how & with whom do we practice God’s Model of: Show .. Teach .. Guide .. Lead, as indicated by David? Here’s another question for you to ponder & to respond to:

{4} What are the ways that we COD men, could invest in the “increasing ministry options” of the COD? Creatively speaking, how can we Impact & Inspire our community?

Does it all sound great, or what? The problem is that too many of us have been convinced for some time now, that we “don’t quality!” .. that God can’t use us! Some of us are stuck in mediocrity & lethargy!

I call it the “Grasshopper Complex” and it comes straight out of God’s Word! Let me “set up” a passage in Numbers, that I’ll read to you shortly: Israel has just spent 430 years in captivity in Egypt! .. God sends Moses to deliver them .. and lead around 600,000 into the Promised Land! .. God does awesome miracles at the Red Sea & in the desert .. and they finally send 12 spies into the land .. “to scout it out!” They return .. and now give their report to Moses & the congregation! (Read Numbers 13 : 27 – 33)

Some Observations:

{1} The Promised Land (which is the Will of God) DOES flow with milk & honey! There IS sweet fruit there!

{2} Where are the Calebs today .. to take possession of all that God has promised for His people? It was God’s will for them to enter the land! Today, God also wants US to find the Promised Land of His will for us, so we too can “enjoy the milk & honey!”

{3} Verse 33 says: "We seemed like Grasshoppers in our own eyes .. and we looked the same to them!" Wow! .. what a Sad Anthem of defeat! We got any Grasshoppers here today .. when it comes to believing & obeying God? WHERE were they looking? At themselves, at what they could do, and not what God could do! (The Grasshopper Complex)

Grasshoppers are small, weak, harmless! .. They fly away from problems & danger! The Israelites felt so small & helpless compared to those "giants" keeping them out of the Promised Land! What about us? What giants are keeping us out of the will of God today? That mistake that Israel made, cost them 40 more years in the desert! How many years it is going to cost you & me? What desert are you going to wander around in? Which side of the Jordan River are you going to die on? (The barren desert? .. Or the Promised Land?) Fear & Mediocrity will kill you spiritually!

I find it absolutely hysterical, how quickly the Israelites forgot what God can do with grasshoppers, huh? Yesterday, when they were in Egypt, God sent "hoards of locusts" (grasshoppers) that covered the ground, and ate every single green tree & plant, within the whole country!

"I feel like a Grasshopper! .. And others view me the same way!?" Really? What voices are you listening to? Certainly NOT the Holy Spirit! Do NOT let the "Grasshopper Complex" keep you from "Stepping Up," and finding your way into the Promised Land of His will for your life! God & Grasshoppers can get the attention of a whole country? Don't think so? .. Just ask Egypt!?"

In closing: In John 12, Jesus speaks to His Disciples: "Whoever serves me .. must follow me! .. And where I am .. my Servant also will be! .. My Father will honor .. the one who serves me! .. Now, my heart is troubled .. and what shall I say!?" – 'Father, save me from this Hour!?' .. NO .. it was for this very reason .. I came to this Hour! .. Father, Glorify Your Name!?"

"Stepping Up!" Think about the "long haul!" God the Father will HONOR the ones who serve JESUS!?! {Find me something better than this on the planet!?!} Human Accolades? .. Trophies? .. Awards? .. Money? .. Success? .. You satisfied with Mediocrity?

As a soccer player .. I was a two-time All American! .. Led the nation in Scoring! .. Got the award for the Best Offensive Player in the National Playoffs! .. Hall of Fame in my University! .. Played professionally in Bolivia & Canada – would've played against Pele .. if I had stayed on in Bolivia! .. Tons of Accolades! .. Trophies by the dozens! .. Amazing articles & photos in the newspapers! (All "human awards!")

Guys, listen Up: Serving the King .. Serving the Master .. Serving your Savior .. DWARFS ALL the "Human Rewards" .. the Trophies .. the Fame! .. What will YOU live for going forward!?"

(Let's Pray)

(# 2) How Do Spiritual Leaders Step Up?!

(Paulo Johnson, Amazon Focus, COD Men's Retreat – October, 2018)

HOW do we learn to Step Up? How does a person go from lethargy to engagement? It's always best to go back to "the Manual" to find insights from God's Word!

Most of us would consider Peter & John as "spiritual leaders!" I mean, they led the early church! .. They were personally equipped by Jesus Himself! .. They stood in the gap countless times for God's cause! Maybe we can learn some things about how to Step Up, by paying attention to ways they conducted themselves! How did they live? How did they react to opportunities that the Spirit of God brought to them? Maybe we can model after their lives and embrace what drove them! (Read Acts 3 : 1-10)

I believe God has given me the following observations from this passage:

{1} The very first thing you note is that these guys are "focused on spiritual things!" In this passage, they're "On their way to the Temple, at the time of prayer!" This speaks of a *disciplined lifestyle*, and the *priority of prayer* in their lives! Truthfully, how important is your spiritual life? Do we just show up at Church & punch the clock? Or is this stuff "real to us?" If we do NOT develop *spiritual disciplines* .. and if *communing with God* is NOT that important to us .. we will NOT Step Up .. when opportunity arises! Many times we don't even notice the opportunity! It's almost a "no brainer" that the #1 reason folks don't "Step Up," is that their Life Focus is not on Spiritual Things!

{2} The cripple asks for money! Peter says: "I haven't got what you're looking for .. but I've got something better!" The world around us – including many Believers as well – are often "Asking for the wrong things, and looking in the wrong places, for love and fulfillment!" It's our job to "discern their needs & offer them something better!" People need Healing! .. Restoration! .. Freedom from Bondage! God wants to use US .. exactly like he used Peter & John! "Give them Jesus .. that's what they need!"

{3} Don't just Talk .. or Preach .. or Pontificate! Get Physically Engaged with people in need! The Bible says: "Peter took him by the right hand .. and helped him up!" Get involved! Help people "stand up again!" Just like Peter & John, we need to "lead people .. and go with them .. into the Temple courts .. as they walk & jump & praise God!" If you're NOT willing to identify with people .. to immerse yourself in their Challenges, you'll continue to "Check Out," and you'll miss the cool stuff God has planned for you!

{4} You want to be a Co-Worker with God, when He does the Supernatural! Bible says: "ALL the people saw the cripple .. walking & praising God! .. They knew he was the beggar who sat at the Temple Gate! .. They were filled with wonder & amazement!" You want to be an "Instrument of the Impossible?" Do you want to be a: Player? .. Pretender? .. Poser? .. An Observer?

Mr. Carter was an "Observer!" He was a world-famous Photographer .. that literally traveled the globe .. looking for "stunning pictures to take!" Awhile back he won the Top Prize for a photo he took of a starving little African girl .. with a vulture sitting in the background, looking on .. clearly waiting for her death! Mr. Carter attended the International Awards Ceremony in Washington, DC, where he received accolades & a Trophy! Shortly thereafter, he drove back to his home area .. put an exhaust hose into the cab of his truck .. and killed himself .. he committed suicide! Apparently the note said: "He just couldn't carry on! .. Couldn't forgive himself .. for shooting pictures of the little girl .. and doing absolutely nothing to help her!" You want to be an Observer?

(Let's read: Acts 4 : 8 – 22) What jumped off the page for you? Here's what stood out to me in this passage!

{1} There's always a "personal price to pay" when you Step Up for God! The leaders of the day totally disregarded the miracle – a crippled man could now walk! Instead, those in power opposed their teachings and

threw Peter & John into jail! But it was too late – 5000 men had already come to believe their message! You want to go to jail? .. That's terrible, right? No! .. the Arrest simply provided another opportunity to witness, this time to the maximum leaders in the Sanhedrin! The lesson is: When you "Step Up" and things seem to go badly for you, then: "Think like Jesus would think .. if He were in the same situation!" But yes! .. Kingdom Advance always costs somebody something!"

In 1959 .. my family left for SA .. simply because my Dad & Mom felt God led them to the Amazon Basin .. to share the Gospel with unknown & uncontacted tribes there! Was there a price to pay? Let me simply say this: "The fruit of obedience .. always far exceeds the agony of suffering!" I don't have time to expound on the "unspeakable hardships they suffered," but let me just read one snapshot, from my recent writings:

"Malaria is a tropical disease .. that kills more people each year, than any other disease on the planet! It makes you "beg God to Allow you to die!" As a child, I remember weeping as I watched my Dad collapse with recurring malaria! Those who knew him would attest he was the Ultimate Iron Man! But his body would become tormented with uncontrollable convulsions – so violent that he was unable to speak, beyond horrible, unintelligible sounds – forever recorded in my memory! Unbelievably, he was freezing cold in the stifling humidity of the tropics! We heaped blankets on him .. but to no avail! I remember knowing for sure that he was going to die .. and wondering what my life would be like .. without my Dad!

Those who found the strength to endure by my Dad's bedside for a few more minutes would suddenly observe an astounding reversal .. that could go back and forth – like a ping pong game – for hours! He was now burning up and soaking wet .. throwing off the blankets and softly moaning! A raging fever rolled into his body like a tsunami! He lay motionless .. and drenched in enormous pools of sweat .. as my Mom rubbed his head and cried out to God for mercy .. and deliverance!

We were isolated – three weeks travel by dugout canoe from the closest outpost Town of Civilization! Malaria Medicine was virtually unknown back then, so this "typical malaria torture" would go on and on until he was finally too spent to move .. literally, at the doorway of Death! At some unpredictable point during the incredibly long & dark night .. the chills & fever would suddenly subside .. and quietly sneak back into the Jungle! Totally exhausted people .. were finally allowed to fall into a fitful sleep!"

In a nutshell: "Sacrificial Living" .. and sometimes Dying" .. are always Core Ingredients for the Salvation and Transformation of a Nation!" (But God spared him .. as faithful Warriors in NA .. prayed without ceasing!)

Guys, listen: YES .. there will always be a personal price to pay .. when you "Step Up for God!" But I'd rather be a "Commando for Christ" .. who bleeding & maimed .. than a "Couch Potato Christian" .. who's disengaged & irrelevant! Never Forget that: "The Task before us .. is NEVER as great as the Power behind us!"

{2} Spending time with Jesus results in the ability to go far beyond Ourselves! "When the leaders saw the courage of Peter & John .. and realized they were unschooled, ordinary men .. they were astonished .. and took note that these men had been with Jesus!" The foundation for everything the disciples achieved .. was the time they spent with Jesus! It begs the question: "How much quality time do we spend with the Master?!" If you're NOT in love with Jesus .. and NOT interacting intimately with Him, you'll never "Take Him to the Streets!" Time with Him changes your life .. your goals .. your perspectives!

When people look at us, do they see "Courage in Action?" .. Are they "Astonished?" .. but for the right reasons?! Do they say: "Hey, that guy there? .. He's been with Jesus, man! .. I mean, there's not a shadow of a doubt!" Here's the scoop: "The direct product of being with Jesus .. is taking Him to the world!" If your life is NOT about "Stepping Up" .. then I hate to tell you .. but "you don't know the Real Jesus .. and you're NOT spending enough quality time in His presence, okay?!" {Let's not blow any smoke here!}

I was at a missionary Guesthouse in Lima, Peru one evening, and met an attractive, single Brazilian missionary lady, who was about to fly back to Brasil! She told me she worked as a Bible translator, with a remote Amazon

tribe! She had a **canoe** and an **outboard motor**, and traveled up & down those isolated rivers, far beyond civilization! **From the discussion it was clear that she worked alone, and had no Team around her! So as she climbed into a taxi, I asked her: Voce trabalha sozinha? (So you work alone?) She shook her finger, and said: "Nao, nao! (No, no!) .. God the Father .. God the Son .. and God the Holy Spirit go with me everywhere I go!?" Boom! .. Just like that .. she was gone! Man, I don't even know her name or organization! But guys, "she had been with Jesus!?" (If people don't "pick up" that you've been with Jesus .. then maybe you haven't been!)**

{3} True warriors will always obey the Mandates of God .. over the Mandates of Men! To keep the message from spreading, the Sanhedrin told Peter & John that "they could no longer speak or teach .. in the Name of Jesus!" Sometime soon, as the End Times come upon us, we're going to be told the same thing! Even today, the anti-God people are trying to "muzzle the Church!" You're not allowed to "have an opinion anymore! .. And if you DID have one .. you for sure .. are never permitted to express it!"

So how did the "boys in Acts" respond to the threats & intimidation? With zero hesitation they said: "Judge for yourselves .. whether it's right in God's sight .. to obey YOU rather than God! .. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen & heard!"

In closing: Peter & John impacted their world! They actually "turned it upside down!" When the Sanhedrin couldn't figure out "how to punish them," they let them go! As they stepped outside, do you remember what was going on?!? The Bible says: "And all the people were praising God .. for what had happened!" God was massively Glorified .. because two unschooled & unlearned men .. "Stepped Up .. and didn't Check Out!"

(Let's Pray)

(# 3) Stepping Up, Closer to Home!

(Paulo Johnson, Amazon Focus, COD Men's Retreat – October, 2018)

How many of you got the Wedding Invitation?!? What Wedding, you say? Who's getting married?!? Their names are: "The Church & Jesus Christ!" Isaiah 62 : 5 says: "As the Bridegroom .. rejoices over the Bride .. so shall your God .. rejoice over YOU!"

Revelation 19 : 6-9 describes this Wedding: "Hallelujah! .. For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns! .. Let us rejoice and be glad .. and give him the glory! .. For the marriage of the Lamb has come .. and His Bride has made herself 'ready!' .. It was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen – bright and pure! .. For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints! .. Then the angel said to me .. write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb! .. And he added: These are the True Words of God!"

What have YOU done with your invitation to the Wedding Feast? I sure hope you "believed and are saved!" Do you realize how much God rejoices over you? .. Isaiah says: "More than a Bridegroom loves his Bride!" The big question today is: As the Bride of Christ .. have we made ourselves "Ready?" .. Are we Pure & Bright – like Isaiah describes? .. Are we "Clothed in fine linen – Full of Righteous Deeds?" If you were Arrested for being "in possession of too many Righteous Deeds," would there be enough evidence to convict you? – yes or no?!? .. Have you been "Stepping Up? .. Or Checking Out?!?"

What do you think about the Church today? What's your impression of Family of God? What attitudes do you harbor (privately or not so privately) about God's people? In all honesty, how would YOU evaluate the "Health" of the Bride today? How's she doing?

Not long ago I attended a Conference of Missions Veterans who develop Global Partnerships all around the world! The former Director of the largest Rescue Mission in NA was one of the speakers! The Los Angeles Rescue Mission that he once directed needed 3.5 million dollars a year, just to survive!

He had developed some very diverse tactics of Fund Raising .. in order to get Money out of the Baptists .. Methodists .. Presbyterians .. all denominations & independent churches! He was good at what he did! The poor and homeless benefited & were blessed! But one day, while driving to his next engagement, he heard Jesus quietly say to him: "Why are you raping my Bride?" In shock, he said: "Lord .. Raping your Bride? .. I'm just trying to help the poor .. in Your Name!" Jesus went on to say: "You don't CARE about my People! .. You have NO INTEREST in the well being of my followers .. of my Church! .. You just want their Money! .. You USE MY BRIDE to satisfy your own Needs .. your own Pleasures .. to provide what you consider Important! .. That's the definition of "Rape!" When you're NOT in the Churches .. you criticize them .. you speak poorly of my Bride! You don't CARE about the spiritual well being of my people!!

Jesus went on to say: "But I want to remind you of something! .. I'm in LOVE with my Bride! .. I gave up my LIFE for her – I DIED for her! .. She's MINE! .. And one day soon .. I will come again and rescue her .. and will marry this Bride that I passionately love! .. I'm the Bridegroom! .. The Church is my Bride! .. And I encourage you NEVER to forget that!"

He pulled his car to the side of the road .. got out of the car .. fell on his knees .. and begged God to forgive him for raping the Bride! God forgave him! He said his life was changed forever at that moment! .. Life began that day! He's been caring for the Bride .. "Strengthening the Church" ever since! The real question is: "How much do WE care about the Bride today?"

Having respect and appreciation for the Bride is obviously Vital! But, as a second consideration: What about the actual *Health* of the Bride today? .. Should *that* be a concern? Can we be *honest* about this topic? *The world around us is saying that: "We're Divided! .. Competitive! .. Territorial! .. Self Focused! .. No longer People of Integrity! .. We're too much like THEM .. and not enough like Jesus anymore! .. They think we've lost our way!"*

Unsaved soccer players have told me: *"Now .. let me get this straight! .. You guys want US to come to your Churches .. your Religion! .. You want us to "come be like YOU!" .. Well, I hate to tell you this .. but "we don't want to be like you!" .. In fact .. the more we watch you guys .. the more we realize that: "YOU don't even want to be like you!?"*

So, what do you think? Is Bride sick? .. Is she struggling with various diseases today? The answer is: "Yes!! .. In many places, the Bride is very sick & diseased! Often she can't even get out of bed .. to care for her own spiritual needs! .. How can she bless others .. when she's "too spiritually sick" to even go across the street .. to help someone else in need?" We're not here to criticize! The question is: So, what do we DO about it?!"

Before we go there, let me address what most Christians define as "Ministry" today! What do you think the greatest Quest on the planet is? It's "the Glory of God!" Okay, then how do we achieve that Quest? We often believe there are "two Main Biblical focuses!" One is: "Sharing the Gospel with those around us!" The other?: "Sending the Gospel to the ends of the earth!" Both are critical! .. Both are desperately needed! .. It's still true: "That the light that shines the farthest .. is the one that's the strongest at home!" It all sounds great! .. Except that the light is fading in this Nation! .. The Beacons are gone! .. The children & youth of America .. don't even own a "Candle" today! .. Darkness & heathendom are the Norm! .. Does it matter to us .. that "the Bride is sick .. and the lights here at home .. are going out?!" So again, what do we DO about it?

My friends, listen carefully! Here's the problem: *We will never reach that Quest (Glory of God, here on earth), unless & until, we FIRST commit ourselves to "a Primary Task" .. that was given to ALL believers .. but that MOST have forgotten about!*

To answer the question: "How do we help an unhealthy Bride?" .. let's rewind the life of Peter .. to find some Core Values .. and see what Jesus said .. about caring for His Bride! Let's look very closely .. at the three "Read-My-Lips-Assignments" that Jesus personally gave Peter! Three life-changing encounters that clarify what OUR primary focus should be as well!

{1} *First Assignment? On a very normal day .. Peter & his brother Andrew were fishing – "Casting their nets" .. into the Sea of Galilee! Then Jesus – a guy they'd never seen before – walked up and said: "Hey! .. Come follow me .. and I will make you Fishers of Men!" (Mark 1) So, Peter left his nets and began to follow a Perfect Stranger!*

From that moment .. Peter's life was changed .. dramatically and forever! His lifestyle of finding & catching fish .. changed to a lifestyle of finding & investing in other people – a "fisher of MEN!" Jesus said: "Peter, I want you to focus on others & their well being!" This speaks of Evangelism .. caring about others .. reaching them! Are we "Fishers of Men" today? Do you ever "Share the Gospel?" We catching any fish at all? When's the last time you "Baited a Hook for God?"

So how do you catch fish anyhow? Any fishermen here? .. They're the greatest people .. and the biggest liars as well! I know this is heavy stuff guys, but it seems you have to: "Go to where the fish are .. to the lakes, rivers, ocean & then offer them food!" You can't catch fish, sitting in your living room, watching a Fishing Show on TV! Well then .. how do you catch Men? .. how do you reach People? "You have to go to where they are .. to

the streams of life .. neighborhood river .. to the oceans of business .. and offer them spiritual food!" You can't catch men by simply sitting in your Church, listening to your Pastor teach on Evangelism & Discipleship? (no matter how vital that is!) So what was Peter's first task? "Reach Others Around You!"

{2} Jesus issued the "Second Assignment" .. just BEFORE Peter denied him! Pretty amazing, huh? We all fail, but Jesus knows how to meet people .. before they fail .. and afterwards as well! Guess that includes all of US, right? What an amazing God!

In Luke 22, just before Peter denied the Lord, Jesus said: "Simon, Simon! .. Satan has asked to sift you as wheat! (It wasn't just Job!) .. But I've prayed for you, Simon .. that your Faith fail not! .. And when you have returned .. Strengthen Your Brothers!"

Your FAITH is the Core of it all! So what was his "Second Assignment?"

✚ "When you have returned Simon?" .. Get out there and plant a Church, son!

✚ "When you come back to me?" .. Start a Seminary .. a Mission Board .. an Orphanage

✚ "When you return?" .. Go build a 20 million dollar building .. so the Sheep can mill around in it .. for 10 – 15 hours a week!

No! .. He's saying: "Simon, listen: Your faith is gonna be severely challenged! .. but while I'm up there dying alone on that cross .. I'm gonna be praying for you, okay? .. And once you get it all sorted out .. and once you've forgiven yourself .. and once you've returned to me .. what I REALLY want you to do .. is Strengthen Your Brothers!" (the Bride!)

How can you return, if you don't go away? WE sometimes "grow cold .. go away in our Hearts as well!" But Jesus is clarifying that when we DO come back to Him, the assignment never changes! It will always be: "Strengthen! .. Build up! .. Fortify! .. Equip your Brothers in Christ!" Is that a major priority for you today? .. Your lifelong "mission?" .. Is THAT what defines you – what makes you tick? .. "Strengthening other Believers?!?"

{3} Peter's Third Assignment?: In John 21 .. AFTER Peter had denied the Lord .. Jesus meets him on the seashore! .. It's early in the morning! .. He's cooking fish on the fire! .. He invites Peter to breakfast! .. I mean, the lad jumps out of the boat .. into the water .. leaves John to haul all the fish in .. and races into the presence of the Lord .. as quickly as possible! That's Peter! (I wish I ran to Jesus like that .. every time I heard His voice!)

Does that sound like US today? .. What're WE racing towards? .. What're we chasing? .. Whose Presence do YOU value enough .. to jump out of a boat and swim to shore for? But WHY did Peter ACT like this? Because he had a Relationship with Jesus – a strained relationship at the moment – but a Love Relationship nonetheless! (Who or what are you in love with today?)

Jesus then asks him three times: Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these? .. referring to those stinkin fish – his livelihood! Three times Peter answers: "Lord, you know I love you!" Three times then, Jesus says: "Feed my Lambs .. Feed my Sheep .. Take care of my Sheep!" .. (If you truly love me Peter .. then "focus on Spiritual well being of my Bride!)

So, Peter's three assignments were what? .. Fish for Men! .. Strengthen your Brothers! .. Feed my Lambs & take care of my Sheep! Has it occurred to you yet, that God has the same Agenda today? Our "list of Assignments" is exactly the same as Peter's was, almost 2000 years ago! God's priorities are still intact and Biblically clear!

So, what's your role within Body of Christ? If Jesus asked you today: *Do you love Me more than your profession .. your livelihood .. those stinkin fish in your life .. what would you say? .. "Lord, you know I love you!"* And what do you think His answer would be? I suspect He'd say: *"Johnny: Would you feed my lambs? .. Kevin: Could you take care of my sheep, man? .. Tommy: Strengthen your brothers! .. Would you guys do that .. for me? Guys, let's not kid ourselves: "Service is always be the product of Relationship!"*

Let me drop a bomb on you! Listen carefully my friends: *"Nurturing the Body of Christ will always be .. the most significant Venture on the Planet!" .. Yeeoow!! .. A missionary's supposed to say that Missions ("reaching all nations") is the most important thing! Not so, my friend! Missions should be the "By-Product .. the Result .. the First Fruits of strong Believers .. and a spiritually healthy Church!"*

"The Assignment will never be more important .. than those who fulfill it!" Have you ever wondered why half the world still has never heard of Jesus? .. Bingo! .. The only way the ends of the earth will ever hear the truth .. is through equipping the family of God .. caring for the Lambs .. and feeding the Sheep! The Centrality of the Church .. in God's plan to Bless the Nations .. is simply non-negotiable!!

"Nurturing the Bride .. will always be the Ultimate Means .. to the Ultimate Quest!" .. Why? .. Because Local outreach .. Discipling others .. Missions .. Issues of Justice & Mercy .. Caring for the orphans & widows .. ALL these things spring forth .. from a Love Relationship with the One who paid it all!

Let me close with some practical suggestions, from my own "experiences & failures:"

(1) *Create Hunger! .. Make people Thirsty! .. Live in such an impressive way .. that others will notice & ask why you're so different from the norm! .. If that's never happened to you .. you probably better re-evaluate .. and alter your present Lifestyle!*

(2) *Make "Relationships" a top priority! .. The world is saying to us today: "We don't care how much you know .. till we know how much you care!" .. If we show Love .. if we earn the right to "speak into their lives" .. people will listen & God will work! .. Miracles happen .. when God goes far beyond our wildest dreams! .. You want to see miracles happen? .. Then start dreaming .. and give God a chance to change lives!*

(3) *Expect to be surprised by God! .. Be alert .. live in anticipation of what God's gonna do today! .. He'll open the doors! .. You just have to walk through them!*

(4) *Ask God for the impossible! .. "We have not, because we ask not!" .. If your dreams do not verge on the Impossible .. then you're shooting way too low!*

(5) *Be a fun person! .. Often Christians are the most Severe .. Isolated .. Harsh .. Legalistic .. Boring people on the Planet! .. We're telling the world: "Come be like us!" .. but they don't wanna "be like us!" .. Be an Attractive .. Friendly .. Caring person! .. Christians should be "Enjoying the Journey!" .. but too many of us look & act like "we're already dead .. and don't have the good grace to lay down somewhere!" ... If you're saved .. and truly happy .. then try telling your face .. and your heart about it, okay?!?*

(6) *Finally: Know & love the Message" .. Stay in the Word .. and let it speak to you daily! .. Allow God to transform you .. till the day you die! .. The only thing that can change our world .. the only answers to be found in life .. are found in the Word of God! .. So enjoy it! .. Don't use it as a Club! .. Use it as Bait for the fish .. Milk for the Lambs .. Fodder for the sheep! .. It's the final word on everything .. the "ultimate filter" through which we process life! .. And .. it'll be with us throughout Eternity .. so get used to it!*

(Let's bow our heads:) *Let's take an Inventory today! .. Are you a Fisher of men? .. Are you focused on money & success? .. Or on people? .. Are you "strengthening your brothers?" .. Or "tearing them down?" .. Are you feeding the Lambs? .. Looking after the Sheep? .. Are you willing to help a sick Bride .. come back to good health?*

In our society .. what do we do with "sick people?" .. Do we take them to the Back 40 and shoot them? .. Do we throw them under the bus .. and trample them? .. NO, we nurture them back to health! .. We find medicines for their diseases .. and we provide special care for their recovery! { Let's do the same .. for the Family of God! }

Today's the first day .. of the rest of your life! .. "Change .. Refreshment .. Renewal" .. can come Today! .. As we consider our "fantastic Bridegroom" .. what kind of a Bride .. ought we to be?!?

(Let's Pray)

(# 4) The “Key Ingredient” to Stepping Up!

(Paulo Johnson, Amazon Focus, COD Men’s Retreat – October, 2018)

So what happens now?!? Let’s say you’re a guy who’s “willing to step up!” Maybe you’ve been “Checking Out” for a long time .. maybe your whole life?!? Maybe God has spoken to you this weekend, and “you’re done with Checking Out!” .. Or maybe you’re someone who’s “already been Stepping Up” for a long time now!

Where do we go from here? .. How does “genuine & significant change” come to your reality? .. What kind of Attitude should you have? .. How are you going to live .. going forward?

May I suggest there’s a “way to live,” that massively enhances “your enjoyment of life,” and incredibly “expands your significance” in this world! I’m totally convinced that if Christians would “Live by Faith,” we could change the world .. we could finish our Task! “Supernatural Living? .. Is it a “Lost Art?” .. Or is it still a “Requirement, that enhances blessing!”

Here’s the problem: When we think of Supernatural Living .. we think of the Past .. the great Heroes of the Bible .. Hebrews 11 .. a past era of time! .. We no longer look for – or expect – God to work Supernaturally!

However, the Bible clearly says that: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today & forever!” Do you actually believe that? You do? Well then, why would this same Jesus have told his disciples in John 14 that: “He that believeth on me, the works that I do, shall he do also .. and greater works than these shall he do .. because I go unto my Father! .. Whatsoever you ask in my name, that will I do!” .. Why?? .. “That the Father may be glorified .. in the Son!” The obvious question is: “So, how many greater works have we done, over the last month or year?” Seriously .. does this sound as though Jesus expects us to take a break from Supernatural Living?

There’s a “Cosmic Battle” going on – God versus Satan! There’s a world to be won! Maybe the question for us today is: “How big is our God? .. What’s He still capable of?” Maybe God’s getting old and feeble – what do you think? He’s been around a long time! Does He have the same power .. the same agenda? .. Is He still capable of the supernatural? .. You think so? .. Well then, when was last time He did something Supernatural for you?

Scripture is clear that faith is essential to an effective Christian life! The Supernatural Lifestyle is NOT an option .. it’s a requirement! God says without faith it’s impossible to please Him! .. Whatsoever’s not of faith .. is sin!! (We have a choice to make here!)

In our world today, everyone has a specialty! I know God can do anything & everything. But, He has one too .. “Impossible situations!” He loves them! .. They’re his munchies – He has them for snack! .. The more impossible, the better! .. Why? .. Because there’s more potential for Him is to bring honor & glory to Himself!

So what do you think God’s greatest problem is today? .. Murder? .. Drugs? .. Other Religions? Guys, God has no problems, but if He did, it would be: “He can’t find anyone .. who will give Him something to sink His teeth into!!” .. “Oh God – bless Aunt Sally’s crooked finger .. and give me a good grade on my Test!” .. God’s saying: “Meathead, study, and you’ll get a good grade! .. Isn’t there anyone out there, who’ll trust me for the Supernatural anymore? .. No one that’ll ask me for the “Nations as their Inheritance??” Where are those people who are asking God for the impossible today?!?

My friends – the Word is so full of examples of men & women who obeyed God & saw Him do the incredible & the impossible! Let me challenge you with a couple Biblical examples!

{1} (Moses) God comes to Moses one day on the back side of the desert .. wanting to send him to Pharaoh .. to tell him to let the Israelites go! It was like: “Be a nice guy – let the 600,000 free slaves go! What do you say, Big Boy!” I mean, put yourself in his sandals! .. Looks likes suicide to me! But Moses “Stepped Up” .. big time!

But WHY did God ask Moses to do this? Exodus 9 tells us: “For this cause have I (God) raised thee up (Pharaoh .. and Moses) .. (1) For to show in thee my power! .. (2) And that my Name may be declared throughout ALL the Earth!” So what’s changed from time of Moses till now? Absolutely nothing! God’s still looking for human vessels through which He can show His power .. so His Name will be declared throughout ALL the earth! (We got any takers today?)

{2} (Elijah at Mount Carmel – I Kings 18) Let me set it up: Jezebel, the wicked Queen, had killed the Lord’s prophets! Elijah finally goes to wicked King Ahab! Ahab says: “You the guy troubling Israel?” .. Elijah says: “No King, you are .. because you’ve forsaken the commandments of the Lord & followed Baal! .. Now gather all Israel to Mt. Carmel! .. Bring the 450 prophets of Baal .. and the other 400 prophets of the groves .. that eat at Jezebel’s table.” So Ahab obliges him! Elijah tells the people they need to choose between God & Baal, and follow one or the other! They’re going to have a “Power Encounter” .. to see which God .. can bring down Fire from Heaven!

You like the odds? .. Is that the kind of odds you look for? .. 1 versus 850? Hey, that’s the kind of odds that GOD likes! .. The more impossible – the better!

Elijah lets them go first, and they chant all morning, to no avail! At noon, he begins to mock them: “Shout louder! .. Maybe your god is Busy .. or Sleeping .. or Traveling!” They shouted louder .. and cut themselves! But by evening .. nothing has happened!

Now it’s Elijah’s turn! Let’s pick it up in verse 33: “Elijah arranged the wood .. cut the bull into pieces .. and laid it on the wood! .. Then he said to them: Fill four barrels with water .. and pour it on the offering and on the wood! .. Do it again, he said .. and they did it again! .. Do it a third time, he ordered .. and they did it the third time! .. The water ran down around the altar .. and even filled the trench!”

WOW!!! .. At least one thing is clear! Obviously, this “Elijah cat” is not a Boy Scout! .. Wet wood doesn’t burn! What’s this Dude doing? Isn’t it hard enough to call down fire from heaven? .. NO .. he’s making it even more impossible for God! And God’s really worried, right?!

Can’t you just see God .. walking the corridors of Heaven .. wringing His hands & saying: “Gabriel .. why didn’t we just let this crackpot perish at the brook! .. Why did we send the ravens to feed him? .. This guy’s nuts – he’s painted us into a corner! .. The fool wants fire from heaven! .. He’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer either! .. He’s just done soaked the wood! .. What’re we going to do now?”

You think that’s how it was? .. Are you serious?!? God’s loving this! I can imagine Him getting up out of His Lazy Boy & saying: “Hey Gabe .. I like this guy – He’s giving me something impossible to sink my teeth into!” How far will YOU go with God today? .. What will you trust Him for? .. Think about this: “How does God define Impossible?”.. Does He even have a Definition? .. I doubt it ...

Verses 36 & 37: “At the time of sacrifice .. the prophet Elijah stepped forward & prayed: O Lord .. God of Abraham, Isaac & Israel! .. Let it be known today .. that you are God in Israel .. and that I am your servant .. and have done all these things at your command! .. Answer me, O Lord! .. Answer me .. so these people will know that you, O Lord .. are God .. and that you are turning their hearts back again!”

First thing he does? .. He calls out the “heavyweights!” .. “God of Abraham, Isaac, Israel!” .. He reminds God of who He is! .. (Johnson Paraphrase): “Lord .. it’s your fat in the fire! .. They can kill me .. but it’s your great name at stake! .. You’re the true God!” (God’s glory .. is the Agenda here!) And why should God answer Elijah? .. “So these people’s hearts will be turned back to You again!” (It’s the same reason He’ll listen to you & me as well!)

Verse 38: “Then the fire of the Lord fell .. and burned up the Sacrifice!” That was the “Contract,” right? .. Is that what your Bible says? It actually says: “Then the fire of the Lord fell .. and burned up the sacrifice .. and the wood .. and the stones .. and the soil .. and also licked up the water .. in the trench!” Poof! .. It’s ALL gone! .. I can

imagine Elijah standing there saying: "Heavy!!".. God FAR exceeded anything he could've ever dreamed or imagined!

Verse 39: "When all the people saw this .. they fell prostrate and cried: "The Lord – He is the God! .. The Lord – He is the God!" Guys, there's a principle here: "If you trust God for the Impossible .. He'll go way beyond anything you could ever hope or imagine! .. Give Him a chance .. and see what He'll do!"

So, what was the result of one man standing strong against 850 opponents? .. A whole nation is "turned back to God" .. from their worship of idols!" This country today is worshipping many idols! .. Wealth! .. Success! .. Pleasure! .. Power! .. Materialism! .. Sex! .. Pornography & Self-Flogging! .. The Worship of Self, is the biggest or most common idol! Will we stand in the gap like Elijah, to Glorify God and to turn our nation back to Him? We need Leaders who "Step Up" .. who don't "Check Out!" Listen to what an astute, first-century Christian leader called Iraneus said, hundreds of years ago: "The glory of God .. is a human being .. fully alive!"

Let me tell you about a man in the Ashaninca tribe in Peru, who's "fully alive" today! Cesar Sharete is a Christian leader .. living in the region where the "Shining Path guerrilla movement" is based! .. Five times .. they've tried to kill him .. but God delivered him each time! .. His brother, who's also a Pastor, was killed by the Shining Path! .. Both his parents died at their hands as well! .. One village called Chichireni has 150 orphans! .. Another village – Matareni – has 200 more! .. Cesar has 8 children of his own to care for! .. In a meeting awhile back .. Cesar told us that: "God had recently led him to adopt 8 orphans .. whose parents were killed by the Shining Path!" Guys, this dude doesn't even have a "pot to pee in" .. but he now has 16 kids .. to trust God for!?! His prayer request? .. "Pray that God will help me find enough clothing .. to cover my kids! .. Some of my little ones are still naked!" I just sat there and wept! I gave him an Offering, but his Trust is in the Lord! As a "Spiritual Leader," he had a choice .. "to Step Up or to "Check Out!"

{3} (Last Biblical example is Gideon) In this account in Judges 7, God wanted to remind His own people of who He is! They were back again, worshipping Baal!

Has God got a sense of humor or what? Gideon's hiding out, down in the winepress, threshing wheat, and an angel comes to him & says: "The Lord is with you – you mighty man of valor!" – Right! He told the angel: "My clan is the weakest in Israel & I'm the least in my family!" Do you feel weak & insignificant? Then you're also a candidate for God!

So God sends Gideon to fight the hoards of Midian! The Bible says they were like "Multitudes of grasshoppers" – "They & their camels were without number!" Let's just say there were a lot of "home boys" down in the valley!

Gideon puts together 32,000 men! But God says: "Too many .. lest Israel vaunt themselves against me saying – mine own hand hath saved me!" Basically he's saying: "If I let them win, they're gonna say .. "We're bad .. We're bad!" So he whittles them down to 10,000 .. but again God says: "Too many!" He finally ends up with 300 men!

Let's pick it up in the afternoon, as Gideon runs into some of his friends (Johnson Paraphrase): "Hey Giddy .. what's on for tonight, son?" .. I can hear him saying: "Well, some of us are going down to fight the Midianites!" .. "Hey, that's cool – how many are going?" .. "300" – "Say what? .. 300?? .. Are you Nuts, man? .. You been down in that winepress far too long, son! .. You been hitting the bottle down there, or what? .. Giddy, maybe you got sunstroke! .. Take a couple aspirin & got to bed! .. You ain't right, son!"

"And what equipment are you taking to fight the hoards of Midian? .. I assume you'll be taking the F-16's .. the Cruise Missiles .. and the Smart Bombs, right?" .. And Giddy says: "Well, I don't think you're probably gonna understand this one either .. but we're taking .. like uh .. uh .. a clay pot in one hand .. and a trumpet in the other!" .. Oh, this is really rich, Giddy! .. NOW it's making sense to me! .. Where do I sign up?!? .. Are you crazy, man! .. Clay pot & a trumpet? .. Did it ever occur to you that the Midianites might show up with swords & spears? .. What're you going to do then? .. Hit em over the head with the Clay Pot as they run by? .. Break their eardrums

with your fool trumpets? .. What happens if your pot breaks, Giddy .. ever thought of that! .. Son, I like your vision, but your methodology stinks!!"

You wanna go? .. You Stepping Up today? .. Does everything have to make sense to you .. before you obey God? .. The Word is full of hundreds of examples of people who simply chose to obey! .. They didn't "Check Out" .. when God wanted to use them mightily .. to deliver nations from bondage .. to share truth with dying people .. to lift up our God among all peoples on earth! Where do YOU fit in today? We need to "Get out of the stands – Get into the game!" Some of us need to stop fooling around with our lives & the gifts that God has given us! It's time to surrender .. all you have .. to Him!

God delivered a whole nation .. through one faithful servant & 300 warriors – who were willing to simply Obey Him .. even though the assignment looked ridiculous .. and completely impossible! "Supernatural Living! .. The only way to really live!"

It may sound far out, but God's looking for the Gideons of today .. the Davids, the Elijahs, the Esthers, the Daniels, the Ruths .. the sons & daughters of the King! .. Where are you? .. What are you doing with your life? Let's go home & "Step Up" for our God!

In closing, I love the movie *Brave Heart* .. with Mel Gibson & the liberation of Scotland! In one of the scenes, he rides up on a horse in front of his ragtag army! They're poorly dressed, with sticks & staves in their hands! Across the valley, the well equipped English troops await, many on horseback, with their superior weapons in hand! Mel shouts out to his men: *"Fight with me! .. Fight with me! .. Every man dies .. but not every man really lives!"* .. His men rise up & fight valiantly! An incredible victory is won that day, and Scotland finds it's freedom!

Not long ago, I thought of a *parallel* that might be relevant to us! What would you do, if Jesus rode down the aisle of your church next Sunday, on a great white horse, and cried out: *"Fight with me! .. Fight with me! .. Every Christian dies .. but not every Christian .. really lives!"* How many of us will *"Step Up .. and really live?!?"*

(Please bow your heads): Let me ask you to ponder what God has said to you this weekend! I encourage you to *"drive a stake in the ground today!"* .. If you *don't clarify* those areas where you *need to trust God for change*, then this weekend will be a lot like *"pouring water on a duck"* .. *It will not penetrate, and thus, will be of no real value in the long term! Embrace what He's got planned for you .. and "Live Supernaturally" .. for His Glory!*

{Let's Pray}