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SURVIVOR? 1 Thessalonians 5:19-28

One of the most successful television shows of this century has been *Survivor*. Laurie and I are not fans of the show, but we understand the concept. The goal, of course, is to survive, not be defeated or voted off the island and be the last person standing. Obviously the \$1 million prize is great motivation for being the last survivor. That is fine for a television show or a competition, but I submit to you that it is not nearly enough for a life. Surely we are here to do more than merely exist and be the last person standing. Is that what you want for your life? It's easy to see that life has to be more than that. Imagine a person who suffers a traumatic injury and goes into a coma, then lives to be 100 years old. That person most definitely is a survivor, but would you view that as an enviable life? No one would.

Clearly life is not just about duration, but about quality as well. Last week I had to undergo an MRI exam on my elbow. I had to lie on my side with my arm extended and my head resting on my shoulder. They slid me into that tube and I had to lie there completely still for 45 minutes. Hey, if anyone is interested in making millions of dollars here's an idea. Invent an MRI machine that can do its job in 2 minutes. Lie perfectly still in an awkward position in an enclosed tube for 45 minutes and you will find that a number of not very pleasant things happen. You have several places that suddenly decide to itch. You know how it is when you are told you have to stay completely still? Within a minute or two you start to become obsessed with the need to move. Your shoulder goes to sleep and your arm starts to hurt...a lot. You have no way to keep track of time, and it seems to go on forever. It wasn't torture. They weren't waterboarding me. I've endured far, far worse. I survived it. But I can guarantee you that I do not want that to be a model for my life. Yeah, it was miserable, but I survived. Yay me. I want a lot more out of life than that. I don't want to just survive. Neither do you. We all want to thrive. But what must happen for us to thrive? Today we'll look at a couple of concepts that are essential if we are to thrive, not just survive. We will find them in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-28.

DON'T PUT OUT THE FIRE

These verses are Paul's closing comments to the Thessalonians. They are brief parting encouragements. Some people conclude there must have been a problem in the Thessalonian church with letting the Holy Spirit work and listening to prophecy. I do not believe that was the case at all. It was clear in the first chapter

that the Holy Spirit had worked in powerful ways among them. There is no hint anywhere in the letter that they had a problem with letting him work. This is just a gentle closing reminder, sort of like a parent saying, “Be sure to eat your veggies.”

The verse tells us not to “quench” the Spirit. Most of the modern translations use that word. I am not crazy about it. The Greek word Paul used most commonly referred to putting out a fire. The English word quench can mean put out a fire but usually means to satisfy thirst. That’s not what Paul meant. He was talking about seeing a fire, grabbing a fire extinguisher and putting it out as quickly as you can.

There are a number of symbols used for the Holy Spirit in the Bible, but fire is one of them. The most obvious example of that happened on the day of Pentecost. On that day the Spirit of God was given to all of the followers of Jesus, for the first time. Previously the Spirit had been given to particular individuals that God wanted to use for special purposes, but now everyone who believed in Jesus received the Spirit. Acts 2:1-3 says, “When the day of Pentecost came they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and come to rest on each of them.” The fire represented the Holy Spirit.

It is no accident that giving the Holy Spirit was first displayed as fire coming to rest on people. Then, as now, that pictured people being “on fire,” meaning being filled with passion. Paul’s instruction here was to not extinguish that fire of passion for Jesus. Paul went on to mention a specific way they might do that. It was by “treating prophecies with contempt.”

This letter may have been Paul’s first that we have, written around 51 A. D. It was written prior to most of the New Testament. So what did these people have to guide them in what to believe and how they were supposed to live? They had Paul’s teaching and that of his representatives like Timothy. They knew they could trust that. But those guys didn’t live with them, so how were they supposed to apply God’s truth day to day? Ephesians 2:19-20 says, “You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” They had the apostles’ teaching, like that of Paul. But they also had prophets.

There were people who were gifted to preach and explain to them God’s truth. The problem with that was, how could you know who was really a prophet of God? Do

I need to point out that throughout history there have been lots of people who claimed to be prophets revealing God's truth? For instance, there were a couple of guys named Mohammed and Joseph Smith who claimed precisely that. Were they the real deal? Paul said they shouldn't just gullibly swallow the line of every clown that shows up with a "word from God." He said, "Test them all, hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil." How do you test what people say? How can you know who is really speaking truth?

Paul ran into a problem in Thessalonica because the people in the Jewish synagogue there rejected his message and militantly opposed his ministry. Paul went from there to the town of Berea. Acts 17:11 says, "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." They tested what Paul said by looking at Scripture, in that case it was Old Testament truth. Timothy later had to deal with false teachers and it was a mighty struggle for him. In 2 Timothy 1:13-14 Paul told him, "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us."

Compare any prophet wannabe's teaching with that of the apostles. Does it match up, or does it vary or even contradict? If it is not a good match, it's not real. Compare what Joseph Smith and Mohammed said with the apostles' teaching and you will quickly see it is not in agreement. Hold to what is good and reject what isn't.

We can douse the flame of the Holy Spirit by not listening to the Word of God and applying it to our lives. It is there we learn about the hope of the gospel, about God's unconditional love, about his grace that brings forgiveness and hope, that sets us free. If we are not continually listening to his truth and putting into practice we are inevitably shutting down the work of the Holy Spirit. Let's not do that.

Notice what this imagery tells us the Holy Spirit seeks to do in our lives. He is a flame that comes to set our hearts on fire. He wants to create people who live with great passion every day of their lives. This is enormously important to take note of because if we are to really thrive in life we must have passion. To live without passion is to be lifeless, and if we are lifeless, by definition we are only existing, surviving and nothing more. That is not how God intended for us to live.

Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Jesus said this is the greatest of all the commandments. Love God with everything you are and have. Do it passionately! Proverbs 23:17 says, “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord.” Romans 12:11 says, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” Never have a day when your fervor wanes, when you have no passion for God! You no doubt recall God’s criticism of the Christians of Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-16. They were neither hot nor cold. He said, “I wish you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

Passion for God spreads to everything we do. Colossians 3:23 says, “whatever you do, do it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.” Whatever you do, do it passionately, with the same zeal you have for the Lord. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says, “whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” Whatever you do! These verses tell us God wants us to be filled with passion whether we are praying, telling someone about Jesus, washing the dishes, doing our job at work or even paying bills.

We both want and need passion, fire, zeal, to be truly alive. Joss Whedon, successful Hollywood producer and screenwriter, said, “Passion is the source of our finest moments...If we could live without passion...we would be hollow...Without passion we’d truly be dead.”

Toby and Anna changed the name of their little girl, Ella. They found out that the process of changing a name on a birth certificate is far more complicated than they could ever have imagined. Anna went to the county court building, waited her turn, then had a government employee tersely hand her forms to fill out. She did that, then brought the forms back to the employee, only to be informed that there were a bunch of other hoops to jump through. The lady could have saved Anna considerable time by laying out the whole process for her to begin with and helping her with it, but she didn’t do that. She was doing her job, sort of, but she was doing the absolute minimum she could do to help Anna, and she did it with an air of annoyance that someone had the effrontery to bother her with such things. This is a person who apparently is bored with her job and her life and is going through the motions, enduring, surviving, but utterly lacking in passion.

Compare that with the true story of a hotel in Atlanta that was so concerned about customer service they gave each of their employees a \$2000 account to solve problems for customers. One woman, a customer relations person at the hotel, got

a call from a business man who stayed at the hotel the night before he flew to Hawaii where he was to make an important business presentation. He called in a near panic because upon arrival in Hawaii he realized that he had left his computer with the presentation on it at the hotel. He asked if there were any way they could ship the computer to him over night because the presentation was the next day. The woman told him she would take care of the problem. She found out that they had missed the deadline for overnight shipping. At that point she could have called the man back and told him there was no way they could get his computer to him the next day. She could FedEx it immediately, but he wouldn't get it in time. Perhaps he could reschedule his presentation. She had done what she could. But she didn't do that. She wouldn't give up. Instead, she got the computer, went to the airport, bought a round trip ticket to Hawaii, flew overnight to the islands, hand delivered the computer just in time for the presentation, then flew home. That's a person who is doing a lot more than just going through the motions. Which of those is more like the way you would like to go through life? Which of them sounds like doing whatever you have to do with all your might?

Obviously it is the latter. Unfortunately there is way too much truth to what John Eldredge claimed in his book, *Journey of Desire*, "I continue to be stunned by the level of deadness that most people consider normal and seem content to live with." There was a guy I knew who was in many ways a very admirable man. He was talented, successful in his job, a faithful husband and father, he believed in Jesus and had great integrity, at times he worked very hard at serving God. He was, in many ways, a model for a Christian man. But there was an aspect to this guy that I never really understood. As I got to know him I found out that he was kind of lifeless inside. He went about his life dutifully, always doing what he felt was right, but there was no passion in him, no zeal, in fact, not much real feeling at all. I wished I could have figured out how to help him, because he knew something was wrong, and he didn't know what to do about it.

Unfortunately for most of us life is mostly routine and filled with things that are not inherently exciting. On the day we have an appointment at the dentist's office I don't naturally wake up and say, "Yes! Today we're going to the dentist. I am so excited!" It can sap our enthusiasm, to be sure. That makes it imperative that we understand that our passion is for the Lord. It comes from his Spirit, for if we look to the Spirit he will produce life, and it comes from seeing everything we touch and do as an opportunity to give glory to God by demonstrating our love for him and displaying his character in the way we approach life and deal with people.

It is the natural action of the Spirit of Christ to create passion! There is a thing about Tabasco sauce that you should know. It is spicy and has a distinctive flavor no matter where you put it. When I was in college a friend of mine played a dirty trick on me. One night we were having dinner in the dining hall and they had cherry pie for dessert. I didn't like their desserts much, but cherry pie was the exception. I loved it. Just before I ate my pie I went to get some milk. While I was gone my friend put Tabasco sauce inside my pie. It was almost exactly the same color as the filling. When I got back I took a big bite of that pie, and almost threw up. Put Tabasco sauce in pie and it tastes like Tabasco sauce. It was truly awful. Wherever Tabasco sauce goes it produces that spicy flavor. And wherever the Holy Spirit goes he produces passion. It is his nature so it always happens. That's because he makes us alive, fully alive. In John 7:37-39 Jesus said the Spirit would create streams of living water gushing out from inside us. What does that suggest to you? Does it evoke images of lifelessness, of going through the motions, surviving but uninterested and totally lacking in enthusiasm? Jesus said it would be streams, multiple, of water. The Spirit will produce so much life it can't be contained in one channel, but it overflows and gushes out into multiple channels. That is what we should expect the Holy Spirit to do in all of our lives. Even if our lives are routine, even if we have the most uninteresting of jobs, each new day is a day to serve God by our diligence, our godliness, our love for others in a myriad of ways, something God wants us to do with all our heart. If we live with lack of passion, somewhere we are spraying fire retardant on the flame of the Holy Spirit. How do we do that?

We don't listen

This is what that refusing to listen to prophecies was about. It is refusing to listen to God's Word. In the end this will always come down to disobeying God. We either ignore God's commands for our lives or reject them deliberately. Either way that is like pouring a bucket of water on a campfire. When we disobey God we do so because we think that's where we can find that passionate life. But it backfires, and instead of igniting that life it extinguishes it.

One way we fail to listen to God is by not believing that God's grace is sufficient. The gospel of Christ says that we are fully adopted and loved as God's children through faith in Jesus. But many of us don't believe it. We do, but then we start trying to prove that we are good enough, that we are going to earn God's acceptance. If you do that you will put out the Spirit's fire.

Another way we don't listen to God is we refuse to forgive. Ephesians 5:32 calls on us to forgive as God forgives us. Jesus said there is to be no limit on how much we forgive others. But we say we forgive while still harboring our hurt.

We look to empty sources

In Jeremiah 2:13 God says to Israel, "My people have committed two sins; they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." God is the source of living water, the fountain of real passion in life. But Israel thought they could find life in other places. Maybe some other supposed god could give them what they wanted, or maybe just having more land or more flocks. God pictures them being like people who see a spring bubbling out pure, fresh water, but they wander away from that and build a leaky tank to catch rainwater, but whatever it catches leaks right out. That's how foolish it was to forsake the source of living water.

Unfortunately we easily do the same thing. We look around for things that somehow stir up a little passion in us and we make that the center of our existence, hoping to wring true life out of it. I am sometimes amazed by what people look to in hopes of providing that passion. I've seen people utterly dedicated to the pursuit of sports, business success, politics, movies, money, food, wine, crossword puzzles, off roading, and countless other things. There's nothing wrong with sports, business, money and the rest, unless you think it is going to give you that passion you long for. Then I guarantee you'll find it an empty well.

Many years ago Laurie and I were given tickets to a Chargers game. We have gone to hardly any Chargers games because they play on Sunday, and that's kind a busy day for us, and because we can't afford it. But on this occasion it was at the end of yet another forlorn Charger season, another sort of meaningless game for a losing team. We hustled out of church and got into the stadium not long after the game had started. As is not uncommon for the Chargers they led throughout much of the game but made some stupid mistakes and lost it right at the end. What stood out to me was seeing a guy seated near us so upset after the game that he just repeatedly yelled out the big time swear word. It was like his whole life had been ruined. Now maybe he was that upset because he had bet on the game and the typical Charger flop had cost him so money. But it was clear that he was looking to this game to provide him something it was never going to be able to give him.

If you want living water, the life full of passion, then you are going to have to go to the spring of living water to get it. You cannot get it anywhere else. Suppose you want an In-n-Out double double hamburger really badly. So you go to Chick-Fil-A

and order a double double. How's that going to go? It's not going to work. If you want a double double, go to In-N-Out. If you want real passion, go to Jesus, for he's the only one who can give it to you.

We serve self

One of the best ways you can absolutely suppress the fire of the Spirit is make everything in life about you. Focus on getting what you want for yourself, on manipulating others to get them to serve you, on being self conscious, and you absolutely will sap your life of passion. Like you we've been all too close to brushfires. We've seen the planes flying over the fires and dropping flame retardant on them. When we focus on ourselves it's like dropping flame retardant on the Holy Spirit.

DO LET GOD MAKE YOU SPLENDID

Verse 23 says, "May the God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through." Paul prayed that God would sanctify his readers. The words "holy" and "sanctify" come from the same root. We have seen this idea several times in this letter and have spent some time thinking about it so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it now. But it does play a significant role in enabling us to thrive, not just survive.

Remember the idea of being holy or being sanctified is being set apart. That has two aspects to it. One is to be set apart in the sense of being different or unique, the other has to do with being pure, set apart from any pollution. God is the ultimate Holy One for he is totally unique, there is no one like him, and totally good since there is not even a hint of evil anywhere in him. For God to sanctify us means to set us apart and make us different. We are to be set apart for him and his use. It also means for God to increasingly set us apart from any evil or wrong.

1 Corinthians 6:10-11 says, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." That verse says in Christ you have been sanctified. It is past tense, a done deal. That's true. You have been set apart for God, you belong to him if you are a believer in Jesus. You are now appointed for his special mission and purpose in your life.

But this verse is a prayer that God will even now sanctify you, meaning it is something still to happen. That's also true because God is in the process of changing you, making you more like Jesus, which is to say setting you apart from evil. He is making you more holy in your practice. So God has sanctified us when he set us apart for himself in Christ, he is now sanctifying us by changing us,

separating us from sin, and some day he will completely sanctify us when we are changed at the coming of Jesus into people completely holy.

I want to remind you of Psalm 96:9, which tells us to “worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.” There is some debate about that translation, it could just be “in the splendor of holiness.” Whichever is correct, either way it tells us that holiness has splendor. For God to sanctify us, to make us holy, is to increasingly give us splendor.

Notice what being sanctified is linked with. “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you.” Why did Paul specifically identify God as the God of peace there? I submit to you that it is because there is a link between being sanctified and having peace. To the degree that God makes us holy we will experience increasing peace. Why is that?

What happens when we are not set apart from evil? There is evil in us, we know it and we experience the guilt of that. Furthermore, that evil inevitably damages other people and creates conflict and tension in our relationships. Evil always disrupts peace. Years ago our family was going to fly to Seattle to visit family. It was an early morning flight. We sleepily boarded the plane and got settled in our seats. Just after we were seated a man and his wife came down the aisle and stopped a couple of rows behind us. He told the people sitting there that they were in his seats and they needed to move. They insisted that they were in the right seats. He started to become belligerent and raise his voice. The people sitting there pulled out their boarding passes and proved they had been assigned to the seats. About that time a flight attendant arrived and tried to sort out the mess. The man began loudly berating the flight attendant, making clear he thought the airline incompetent for assigning two groups of people to the same seats. What would God command in that situation? He would tell the man to be kind, patient and loving, even as they tried to figure out a solution. But he was not sanctified. He was not splendid. His actions created lots of conflict and tension even among people on the plane who were not directly involved. His evil did not make for peace. The flight attendants eventually were able to locate two empty seats and had him and his wife sit there, which he did grumpily. Not long after that a flight attendant welcomed everyone to flight number 982 bound for Seattle. At that point Mr. Belligerent said, “Seattle? I’m not going to Seattle.” He’d gotten on the wrong plane. Most definitely not splendid.

But there is also another aspect of being sanctified that comes into play. It is that we are set apart for God and his purposes. It means that our lives have meaning,

that we have a purpose for existing, a purpose that touches every single thing we do. Every act in our lives, from doing the laundry to loving our spouses to whatever we deem our greatest accomplishment to be, has meaning. It has meaning because in the way we approach it and the way we live we can glorify God, and that is infinitely important.

The simple reality is if we do not have meaning and purpose we will never be at peace. In his book, *The Rhythm of Life*, Matthew Kelly wrote, “without a clear sense of the purpose and meaning of our lives, the emptiness is overwhelming. We try to fill the void with pleasure and possessions, but the emptiness is unaffected by such trivialities.” Author Dean Koontz wrote, “Life without meaning cannot be borne.” Our hearts scream at the idea that life means nothing, and we will search high and low for some purpose to it all. There absolutely will be no peace until we understand that we are sanctified, set apart for an infinitely important purpose.

Here’s where it gets really interesting. One of the biggest factors in having passion in life is having a purpose. If we have no purpose then life is empty and there is nothing to be excited about. Being sanctified is not only key to peace, it is also critical to have passion.

CONCLUSION

Notice that Paul prayed that God would sanctify them. Too often we get tied up in knots because we are striving so mightily to sanctify ourselves. This is really the work of God. We cannot set ourselves apart for a true purpose. God has done that. Neither can we make ourselves be like Jesus. God does that. What we can do is ask God the same thing Paul does, to continue making us like Jesus and sanctifying us. We can desire it and not resist it. As we do so we can also make sure we don’t extinguish the flame of the Holy Spirit.

Author and speaker Steve Maraboli says he wants to live his life in such a way that when he wakes up in the morning the devil says, “Oh, no! He’s up.” Don’t you want that too?

One of my favorite movies is *The Rookie*, starring Dennis Quaid. It dramatizes the remarkable story of Jim Morris, a high school baseball coach whose players insisted at the age of 37 that he go to a major league baseball tryout. Morris had played in his younger days, but never got close to professional ability then he hurt his arm. He thought it absurd, but tried out and learned he was throwing 97 miles per hour. He ended up playing in the major leagues. But there’s a scene in the movie where he’s playing in the minors and he’s feeling like quitting. He’s burning

out, losing passion for the game. He is away from his family, he's surrounded by kids 15 years his junior, he feels like he is not going anywhere, he's tired of bus rides and crummy motels. One night he goes to a park and sees some kids playing a Little League game. He remembers the joy of playing the game. The next day he comes into the locker room and his passion is back. He says to his friend, "You know what we get to do today, Brooks? We get to play baseball!" As long as he thought his life was only about advancing, making it to the major leagues, having better circumstances, he was drained of passion. But then he focused on what he got to do and his enthusiasm was renewed. We get focused on our circumstances, on how we want our lives to go, on every inconvenience and disappointment and it drains us of passion. But when we refocus, when we remember, "I am set apart for God. I am loved and forgiven. I have hope and you know what I get to do today? I get to bring glory to God in every single thing I do by doing it with his grace, his love, his kindness, his patience," we can experience that passion again. We can do far more than survive, we can thrive, being fully of life, never lacking in zeal.