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Eighth Message

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# THE LOST SECRET TO SPIRITUAL VITALITY

*SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH*

On February 11, 1986 the nation of Israel waited in breathless anticipation for the arrival of a hero from the Soviet Union. His name was Natan Sharansky, a dissident who worked for the Aliyah, the movement that was pressuring the Soviet government to allow Russian Jews to emigrate to Israel. Sharansky had quite openly denounced to the foreign press the KGB's persecution of Soviet Jews. In 1973 he had applied for an exit visa. He renounced his Soviet citizenship and expressed his desire to emigrate to Israel. Two years later he married Avital, and the day after the wedding he was taken into custody by the KGB. He was tried for treason, and sentenced to 13 years in the Gulag. While he was in prison, his wife, who had emigrated to Israel, worked desperately for his release. Even President Reagan became involved. Now, after 11 agonizing years, he was free at last, and all Israel was waiting to welcome home one her sons.

His release was kept secret even to Sharansky himself. He writes about it in his book *Fear No Evil*:

I was taken to the airport and put in the aeroplane, accompanied by four KGB men. And our direction was West, judging from the sun. That's why I presumed that something especially pleasant was going on. I was very excited. Then, when about two hours passed and it seemed it can't be the Urals, it must be the border of the Soviet Union, I started demanding from them to explain. Finally one of the KGB men came and said he was authorized to tell me the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union has deprived me of the Soviet citizenship due to my very bad behavior, undermining the honor of being a Soviet citizen. Then I answered. I said that first of all, I am deeply satisfied that 13 years after I asked to deprive me of the Soviet citizenship, my demand is already met.

Sharansky had not only had survived his imprisonment, he had emerged victorious over the KGB. This man had no political clout. He had been subjected to endless days of brutal interrogation, solitary confinement, sickness and starvation, yet he emerged victorious and free. During his imprisonment—in fact, on the 45th day of a hunger strike he had embarked upon—the Soviet leader Brezhnev died. It was his heart, not Sharansky's, that had failed to hold up. Shortly afterwards, Brezhnev's successor Andropov died. Four years after Sharansky's release, the whole Soviet state and the dreaded KGB collapsed. Meanwhile this Jewish dissident and prisoner of conscience was enjoying his new-found freedom with his wife in Jerusalem.

How did this man survive years of brutality and deprivation in prison? What was his secret? It lay in something he took with him to the Gulag. Just before he was arrested by the KGB, his wife gave him a copy of the Hebrew Book of Psalms. This was all he had to take with him, but it was all he needed to survive the dark and evil days of his confinement. Quoting again from his book,

In a totalitarian regime, it is essential for an individual to understand his own history and to be connected with his own values. That is why the turning toward history and toward our national roots among my own people became such a liberating process for me and many of my friends. A spiritually liberated person, standing on the firm ground of moral principle, and understanding what he is fight-

ing for, has an inexhaustible reserve of strength to resist totalitarianism. And therein lies the essence of the our struggle.

This will be our theme today as we resume our studies in the apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy. Paul, you remember, was writing to his young son in the faith in Ephesus, instructing him on how to restore a church when all the forces around, like a looming KGB, were bent on destroying his work.

Timothy, as leader of this small band of Christians, was about as much in the minority in Ephesus as Natan Sharansky was in the Soviet Union. The economy of Ephesus was based on the licentious cult of Artemis. The temple that dominated the skyline of the city had become the seventh wonder of the ancient world. Tourists from all over the known world poured into Ephesus, making it the leading banking center in Asia Minor. Thus the temple brought together the destructive and intimidating forces of idolatry, sexual licentiousness, and materialism.

It is no less intimidating living here in the San Francisco Bay Area! Our fast-paced computer world attracts technical wizards from all over the globe. Just to the north lies San Francisco, the leading financial and tourist center of this region. It is also the symbol of sexual licentiousness. The recent gay and lesbian parade in that city was attended by almost half a million people. How can a little church like PBC/Cupertino have an influence for godliness in this intimidating world that seems bent on our destruction? Paul will answer this question (the same question that was perplexing Timothy in Ephesus) in the text to which we come this morning from chapter 4 of his letter.

At first glance, Paul's answer seems rather simple. Don't worry about your influence, says the apostle; just focus on your own spiritual health.

Let's begin reading from verse 6 of chapter 4.

## I. Focus on your own spiritual health (4:6-12)

**In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being [constantly] nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. But discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and [also] for the [life] to come. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers. (NASB)**

### (a) With the right attitude (4:6)

Timothy is pastor to the church at Ephesus, and Paul's first word to him is that he should focus on his own spiritual health in the midst of that decadent place. Have a proper attitude, counsels the apostle. Timothy should not assume that his office will automatically feed his spiritual life or give him spiritual authority. People often make the mistake of thinking that if they could only enter into the ministry on a fulltime basis, then they would automatically become spiritually mature. But it

doesn't work that way. Becoming a spiritual man or woman demands the qualities that Paul sets out in these verses.

Here is the first.

**(b) With the right diet**

**...being [constantly] nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. (4:6b-7)**

Timothy must watch his diet: he must cut out the fat. I had a physical examination recently, and my doctor told me that my cholesterol level is too high. Years of eating ice cream and pouring cream in my coffee have caught up with me, so now I have to cut back on these things. It is my observation that as Christians, our spiritual arteries are clogged with Christian junk food that has dulled our spiritual vitality. What is Paul's counsel to us? It is the same as his word here to Timothy: Feed on the Scriptures until they are inbred (that is the actual meaning of the phrase "constantly nourished"); avoid controversial fables (Paul was perhaps referring to Jewish apocalyptic literature written during the intertestamental period) which did not elicit faith or spiritual health. Avoid this junk food, says Paul. Nourish yourself instead on "the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following."

Years ago on a trip to Israel we came to Caesarea Philippi, which lies at the foot of snow-capped Mt. Hermon. There is a beautiful waterfall there where water from the pure melted snow from the mountain drops about 50 feet to the pool below. It was here that David wrote the words of Psalm 42, "Deep calls to deep at the sound of Thy waterfalls." These falls are the source of the Sea of Galilee, a sea teeming with life and vitality. This sea empties into the Jordan River, which winds its way southward some 70 miles until it empties into the Dead Sea. During that journey, the water picks up impurities of all kinds, and then it pours into the Dead Sea, which has twice the salt content of the great Salt Lake in Utah. Water from the Dead Sea is poisonous and totally useless for anything. Think about that for a moment. The Dead Sea comes from the same source as the beautiful cleansing falls of Caesarea Philippi! But that water cannot sustain life because it is too far removed from the source.

It is the same with American Christianity. We think the Scriptures are too demanding to study and grasp, so we extract from the pure Word the majesty of its history and context and process it with endless human additives and impurities until all its mystery is removed. Then we package the results in banal "how-to" principles, to be consumed in bite-size pieces, like Chicken McNuggets. Do you think this will sustain you when you are diagnosed with cancer? No, you will find it sadly lacking. Feed instead at Mt. Hermon and Caesarea Philippi. Feed on the pure Scriptures.

On Thursday evening last we gathered as elders to pray for Ray Stedman in light of his newly diagnosed cancer. As I looked around the room I was struck by the fact that every man present had a Bible in his hands. No one was holding a Christian magazine or a book on how to live the successful Christian life. Everyone was reading and praying from the pure Word of God, especially the Psalms. This is what sustains us when the crisis strikes.

Natan Sharansky lived at the source, and the Book of Psalms sustained him during his imprisonment. This book was the tool by which he broke out of prison to his real life, and it was the tool that prevented the KGB from imposing their world on him. They took away his Psalms finally, and he went on a hunger strike to get them back. During this intense struggle that lasted for one year, he spent 186 days in a punishment cell. He emerged a mere skeleton of a man, weighing only 35 kg (77 lbs). But Sharansky won in the end. After receiving his Psalms back, he wrote, "I took my Psalm book and for days on end,

with photographs of my dear ones in front of me, I recited all one hundred and fifty of King David's Psalms, syllable by syllable."

Watch your diet, says the apostle to Timothy. Cut out the junk food and feed on the Scriptures.

There is another requirement: it is exercise.

**(c) With proper exercise: Discipline unto godliness**

**But discipline yourself unto godliness, for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and [also] for the [life] to come. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the savior of all men, especially believers. (4:7b-10)**

Every time Timothy fed on the Scriptures, he should exercise himself in godliness, says Paul. The word for gymnasium comes from the Greek word that Paul uses here for discipline. Timothy should apply the same resolve, discipline, sweat and energy to applying the truth to his life, as a gymnast does in training for the Olympics.

Why should the Christian work so hard at becoming godly? Because godliness is more profitable than athletics, according to Paul. It has more value because it is applicable to every sphere of life; it is not limited. In college, I knew an outstanding gymnast who gave himself completely to his discipline. He had everything a gymnast needed: form, grace, and excellence. But his discipline did not impart meaning to his life. It applied only to athletics; it did nothing for his soul. Later he began taking drugs and he ended up a social outcast. Dorothy Hammel, winner of the Olympic gold medal in ice skating some years ago, was asked how winning had prepared her for life. The interviewer was surprised to hear her say that it didn't help her at all to handle the pressures of living in the public sphere. Godliness, however, is applicable to all spheres. Take young mothers, for instance. They practice godliness in the secrecy of the home where they labor to raise godly children. I believe this is what qualifies women to serve in the highest offices in the land.

And this discipline is beneficial in all ages—it lasts forever! As a gymnast I worked out four hours a day for seven years. But what did that discipline get me? I ended my high school years with a concussion, and I ended my college career with cracked vertebrae. Practicing godliness, however, makes a huge difference not only in this life, it carries over into eternity. This is why Paul is so adamant here, and why he says, "It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the savior of all men, especially believers." Spiritual discipline is applicable in all spheres of life and it is beneficial in all ages. This is why we should accept it fully and give it our every effort.

Thus Paul "labors and strives." "Labor" speaks of the toil and sweat of the farmer; "strive" is where we get the English word agony. He agonizes as an athlete does during the intense struggle of an athletic contest so that he might be godly. As he does so he fixes his hope on God who rewards his servants. And Paul understands that it is godliness that is the prime tool that leads people to salvation. This is why Christians dare not compromise, and why Timothy must give himself to the discipline that leads to godliness.

When he was a student at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, Natan Sharansky had written a thesis entitled "Simulating the Decision-Making Process in Conflict Situations Based on the Chess End-game." He determined to employ the same strategy in facing the KGB as he had applied in chess. First, he wrote out his goals: he would study the enemy, expose him, and never compromise (aid) him. Thus he had to refuse the few creature comforts, such as tea or more frequent family visits, which were offered him on occasion by the KGB. He predetermined his moves and then chose the hard road

of never compromising. One year before his captivity ended he even refused a medical release from prison. Instead he demanded that they release him because his imprisonment was unjust. They refused, and so he went back to his cell for one more year.

After I read this, I had to ask myself, do I give this kind of effort to loving my family? Do I predetermine my choices and suffer this way in order to be godly? Natan Shanarsky did. He knew his response would affect not just him but the whole world. He dared not compromise. This is what Paul says to Timothy, “For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the savior of all men, especially believers.”

What would be the result if Timothy did this?

**(d) The result: A powerful influence**

**Prescribe and teach these things. Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but show yourself an *example* of those who believe in speech, conduct, love, faith [and] purity. (4:11-12)**

Even though Timothy was young (perhaps in his early- to mid- thirties), godliness, which was the result of continual study and diligent application, would win him respect even from older people. The most powerful way to influence others is not by engaging in coercion or demanding exhortations, but by example. A friend told me recently that he had rebelled against his parents in his teen years. One night when he came out of his bedroom and looked into the livingroom, he saw his parents kneeling in prayer—and he knew what they were praying for. Twenty years later he recalled this scene and wept as he remembered his parents’ faithful example. This is what will change our children and lead them to righteousness—our godly example to them, without coercion or threats.

Thus Paul counsels Timothy to focus on his own spiritual health. With the right diet and exercise, his influence on the world would take care of itself.

The apostle now turns from Timothy’s personal life to his ministry.

## II. Stay focused in your ministry (4:13-15)

**Until I come, give attention to the reading [of Scripture], to exhortation, and teaching. (4:13)**

**(a) Focus on the proclamation of the Word**

If the secret to spiritual vitality is God’s Word, it is the same in ministry. The source of life in ministry is living at the source—the Word of God. In every setting the Word is to be read, taught, and applied. This, says Paul, is the main thing.

I believe that a terrible demonic deception governs the American church today. There is a lie in circulation that says the way for leaders to be influential is to become what I call “transportation engineers.” This lie says that it is the task of Christian leaders to be always on the lookout over the vast vineyard of life, searching for the most strategic places to exert influence. Leaders are then to be engaged in transplanting God’s little saplings from their own environment into these new and different arenas. The problem is that these bare-root saplings are ripped out of their normal settings and then they are expected to engage, with computer-like speed, in some religious activity. But they are still in shock because they have been bare-rooted and no one has fed them; they have not been nurtured and cared for. Not only are these saplings bereft of influence, they shrivel up and go into shock. Christian leaders are not transportation engineers! They must be gardeners who feed the vineyards with the heavenly waters of God’s Word. This is where saplings can take root and grow. Afterwards God will have no trouble transplanting them according to his own will.

This is what this church is all about. We are not in the business of building a stage for anyone so that he or she might have influence. We

must gather together to hear the Word of God. As you grow in godliness, God will give you a stage so that you will have influence. There is no secret to what we do here in PBC/Cupertino. If you come to the elders’ meetings, you will hear us study the book of Ephesians so that we might be cleansed and encouraged. At our staff meetings we study Lamentations. When I meet with my interns, we translate the Psalms. There are no secret organizational planning strategies. We meet together to feed on God’s Word, trusting him to do the rest.

So Paul tells Timothy to focus on the word of God. And second,

**(b) Focus on the exercise of your spiritual gift**

**Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. (4:14)**

When Timothy was ordained, it was the apostolic practice to lay hands on those being ordained. Timothy, however, was timid by nature, and at times he neglected his gift because he was intimidated by others. This is why Paul had to write the admonition, “do not neglect the spiritual gift within you.”

Why do we need these divine gifts? Isn’t it enough that we have the written Word? Supposing you went to a symphony concert and all the musicians merely sat looking at the sheet music in front of them. Then the conductor announced, “We’re going to have a sheet music study today.” That would be a boring symphony concert, wouldn’t it? It is the same with the Word of God. The Scriptures come to life through the exercise of divine gifts. The life of Christ is made manifest to the body through those who are gifted. This is why a church can be doctrinally sound but dead as a door nail—because people are not using their gifts. Do not neglect your gift, and do not ask for permission to use it. Just use it, and then watch the Word come to life in the congregation.

**(c) The value of diligence**

**Take pains with these things; be [absorbed] in them, so that your progress may be evident to all. (4:15)**

Just as personal godliness takes discipline, so does faithfulness in ministry. And Paul tells Timothy that if he is faithful, his influence will take care of itself. George Whitefield, an Englishman, was the most influential person in America prior to the Revolution. He did more than any other man to unite the Colonies spiritually. When he was 17 years old, he began writing a journal documenting his spiritual journey with God, and when his book was circulated in New England, the Christians who read it discovered that this young man had abundant life in the Spirit. Later, when he came to that part of the country, thousands flocked to hear him.

A man named Nathan Cole heard of Whitefield’s ministry. Word had it that Whitefield preached like one of the apostles, and Cole longed to hear him. Whitefield’s visits to Hartford and Wethersfield raised hopes that he would also appear in Middletown, where Cole lived. One morning a messenger raced through Middletown with news that Whitefield would preach out-of-doors that morning at ten o’clock. Cole’s response was immediate:

I was in my field at work. I dropped my tool...and ran home to my wife, telling her to make ready quickly to go on and hear Mr. Whitefield preach at Middletown, then ran to my horse with all my might, fearing that I should be too late. Having my horse, I with my wife soon mounted... We improved every moment to get along as if we were fleeing for our lives, all the while fearing we should be too late to hear the sermon, for we had twelve miles to ride.

After the ride, the Coles made it to the Connecticut River, by Middletown:

I saw before me a cloud of fog arising. I first thought it came from the great river, but as I came nearer the road I heard a noise of

horses' feet coming down the road, and this cloud was a cloud of dust made by the horses' feet...When I came with about 20 rods of the road, I could see men and horses slipping along in the cloud like shadows, and as I drew nearer it seemed like a steady stream of horses and their riders, scarcely a horse more than his length behind another, all of a lather and foam with sweat, their breath rolling out of their nostrils every jump. Every horse seemed to go with all his might for the saving of souls. It made me tremble to see the sight.

Looking at the ferry boats on the river, Cole continued,

...the ferry boats running swift backward and forward bringing over loads of people, and the oars rowed nimble and quick. Everything, men, horses, and boats, seemed to be struggling for life. All along the 12 miles I saw no man at work in his field but all seemed to be gone.

Then Whitefield climbed the scaffolding assembled for his visit. Cole wrote, "...he looked almost angelical: a young slim, slender youth, before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted countenance." Soon Cole was caught up in the moment by a master of gesture and presence who "looked as if he was clothed with authority from the Great God." So powerful was the sermon, Cole concluded, that it "gave me a heart wound...I saw that my righteousness would not save me." (Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*).

When George Whitefield died, he had the largest funeral in the Colonies until the death of George Washington. What was the secret of his ministry? It was the Word of God, and the exercise of his spiritual gift. This is the kind of life that draws people to Christ.

Just in case Timothy doesn't get the point, Paul restates it in his summary.

### III. Focus on staying focused (4:16)

**Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.**

Don't allow anything to dissuade you, says Paul. Keep the main thing the main thing.

#### (a) Both life and ministry require *focus* on God's Word

Our personal life and our ministry require us to be focused on God's Word. So we must cut out the fat. Turn off the TV, put aside all those magazines, and be still and read from the source itself. Don't be satisfied with droplets from the Jordan. Go to the headwaters underneath Mt. Hermon and let the rush of water cleanse you. And it's not enough that we Christians have light, we must have heat too. Allow the light to penetrate you until it burns. Then you will discover a consuming flame of love in your hearts that burns away all the dross and creates in its place holy passions.

#### (b) Both take rigorous *discipline*

Godliness in your own life and the exercise of your gift take dogged determination. Struggle and sweat are required if you are to prove faithful. Don't expect an easy ride, and don't expect godliness to be your natural drift. Use every external means available to you to help you. That's not legalism; that's being smart! I use good reading to stimulate me to godliness. Oftentimes when my soul feels dead, I read a good biography. Then I find my spirit being moved again. And I never forsake weekly meetings for fellowship where I derive cleansing and vitality. Thirdly, I am constantly seeking opportunities to use my spiritual gifts. I don't wait to be asked. I am always seeking to make myself available. This is what helps keep me on track.

Natan Sharansky shares that now that he is in the free world, he finds it much more difficult to remain focused and disciplined. He writes,

In the punishment cell, life was much simpler. Every day brought only one choice: good or evil, white or black, saying yes or no to the KGB. Moreover, I had all the time I needed to think about these choices, to concentrate on the most fundamental problems of existence, to test myself in fear, in hope, in belief, in love. And now, lost in thousands of mundane choices, I suddenly realize that there's no time to reflect on the bigger questions. How to enjoy the vivid colors of freedom without losing the existential depth I felt in prison? How to absorb the many sounds of freedom without allowing them to jam the stirring call of the shofar that I heard so clearly in the punishment cell? And, most important, how, in all these thousands of meetings, handshakes, interviews, and speeches, to retain that unique feeling of the interconnection of human souls which I discovered in the Gulag? These are the questions I must answer in my new life, which is only beginning.

#### (c) In both cases *influence* takes care of itself

Notice that spirituality comes first, in secret, in quiet, while you are alone. There the discipline of godliness is worked out in the normal course of life. This is what leads to influence. In America we have reversed the order. We work so hard to have influence that we lose our spirituality. Then, sensing that loss, we become more aggressive in asserting it. But it is all in vain. Influence is a gift given to you by others because of what they see in you. Gary Vanderet says, "You worry about your own spiritual depth and let God worry about the breadth of your ministry."

During his eleven years in a prison cell did Natan Sharansky ever seek to be influential? Of course not. Even if he had been seeking influence (which he was not) his prison cell would be a strange and futile platform from which to mount his campaign. But when he was released, the world flocked to him because they recognized he was a man of integrity, a hero who refused to compromise his ideals of liberty and justice. When his plane arrived at the airport in Jerusalem, he spoke by telephone to President Reagan. Then he was carried on the shoulders of an excited crowd milling in front of the Western (Wailing) Wall. There, clasping his Book of Psalms, he gave thanks for his deliverance, while millions in the West looked on.

My friends, keep the main thing the main thing!

In conclusion, I want to say that simply because one is a pastor, one can never assume that spiritual growth will be automatic or that influence will be guaranteed by title. Rather, spiritual growth is a dynamic process that is constantly threatened by the Satanic forces of distraction (see Acts 6:2, 4). How easy it is for pastors to be distracted from their real calling and be negligent in their study of the Word! How often have we forsaken the task of feeding the flock in order to be organizers of programs which, when launched, may look innovative, but ultimately are void of spirit and life! Spiritual growth for the pastor, and his influence upon the flock, are based on his continual feeding off the divine life through the Word of God and through the constant exercising of his spiritual gifts. To these two things a pastor is to give ultimate priority, toil, pre-occupation and endurance. In so doing, he will prove the eternal value of these things by being a true example to the flock of godliness in all areas. May we repent of our sin and lay hold of God's grace so that we may be faithful and focused.

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