

One Pastor's Journey to Hear From God

By Rev. Greg Sempsrott

In light of Greg Wiens' articles on Hearing from God, I thought I would share my personal experience in this subject. That doesn't make me an authority on the subject. How can anyone be an authority on the things of God? Truth is, there are days when I feel as if I'm just scratching the surface of experiencing God's presence in my personal life and public ministry.

I've been a pastor since 1981 but it wasn't until 1995 that God really taught me the importance of spending time with Him. As I look back on those early years I probably functioned more out of energy and ignorance, where today, I'm leaning more on wisdom and wounds!

By 1995, I had been a senior pastor for eight years and enjoyed almost every minute of it. We had grown from 165 to 400, expanded the facility and went to multiple services. We had a strong outreach ministry and were seeing people come to Christ on a regular basis. We changed the name of the church and opened the door to the un-churched. On the inside, we established a thriving small group ministry that helped us build healthy disciples. We had also planted our first church just a year earlier. We launched it with a core group of fifty healthy Christians who embraced the vision to reach the lost. By the second year, the plant was running 200 people and we had gained more people than we gave away the year before! It really was a great eight years! But it didn't come without a price.

It was a Thursday night leadership-training event and we had just started the breakout sessions when Fred, one of my elders, asked me how I was doing. He said that I looked tired and he was concerned for me. I appreciated his concern but reminded him what Churchill once said, "The world is run by weary men." He didn't laugh. Instead, he asked me a question that I was in no position to answer correctly, "What would happen if you took the next two weeks off?" I responded, "You mean plan to take some down-time soon?" "No, I mean start tomorrow. The elders can handle things while you're gone." I knew I was tired but I didn't realize I looked THAT TIRED! But I played along and told him it was impossible to leave that soon because there were several things that needed my attention first. As a successful businessman, I thought surely Fred would understand. Then he gently and lovingly nailed me, or should I say, God nailed me with His words, "So, God's church is stuck without you, pastor?"... Gulp!

Now some might have taken offense at that remark but I met every week with Fred for personal accountability and knew how much he loved me and supported me. This was coming from a friend who cared about me. I couldn't ignore his words. He really wasn't talking about taking time off because of exhaustion as much as trying to help me understand what got me there.

What came out of the next two weeks was a transformed pastor. I knew that, for the rest of my life I would view ministry, the pastoral role and my relationship with God, differently.

The next day I found myself sitting with Mickey Evans, the founder of Dunkin Memorial Camp. Dunklin is a Christian-based, drug and alcohol rehabilitation ministry. No, I wasn't there for drugs or alcohol! The elder that had confronted me the night before also served as the chairman to Dunklin's board. He knew Mickey would be the perfect person to teach me the importance of spending time with God.

If you've never met Mickey, he's one of those individuals whose appearance can fool you. He looks like an old cowboy who loves God and probably doesn't have much to say; but I knew better. I first met Mickey several years earlier at a Walk to Emmaus weekend. I will never forget his talk on spending time with God but of course back then, during the energy and ignorance years, I was too busy to do anything about it.

Mickey was just a country boy who graduated from Baptist seminary with Adrian Rogers, Peter Lord, Jack Taylor and a host of other great spiritual leaders. He graduated magna cum laude, and went on to build one of the most successful residential programs for drug addicts and alcoholics in the world. Dunklin has built "Cities of Refuge" on nearly every continent: Europe, Africa, Central and South America. One of the visible signs of the transforming power of God hangs on the wall in the dining hall at Dunklin. Framed family portraits of people you and I will never know. The wall is plastered with them. And above the pictures it reads, "Jewels from the devil's junk pile." You look closely at each picture and you see drug addicts and alcoholics who have been transformed by God's truth and restored to their families. Many are pastors and missionaries in the field today.

When I went in and sat with Mickey, I told him I was tired and just needed time to think and regain my strength. Rather than give me an hours' worth of probing counsel, he reached into his desk and pulled out a legal pad and threw it to me. He then began to teach me about the importance of spending time with God. He shared things about the subject that I never heard in a seminary class or from a seasoned pastor. After giving me some scriptural insight, he sent me out of his office to go sit under an oak tree in a cow pasture and wait on the Lord. He gave me one question that he wanted me to ask God: "Father, how much do you love me?"

I will never forget when I began to sense God speaking to me. I began to weep over the joy of hearing from my Daddy. He told me how much He loved me in a very real and personal way. In my entire ministry I had never experienced this level of intimacy in my relationship with God.

Finally I got up the nerve to ask Him why I was so weary? This was one of the questions that Fred had asked me to ask God. What I heard back from God brought me to my knees and I wept for an hour. In a very loving way God told me that the reason why I was so tired was because I didn't take time to sit with Him on a regular basis. I remember wanting to point to all the stuff that I had been doing for Him as the reason why I didn't have the time but I was not prepared for His response, "My son, the reason you don't take time to sit with me is because you have grown to love the ministry more than you love Me. You love what you **do** for Me more than you love **being with** Me."

For the first time in my life since my salvation, God arrested me. Since 1995, I have changed my time schedule and God has taught me many things: my perspective on "ministry", my understanding of what it means to be a spiritual leader and finally, how I relate to Him.

I would like to share some of the practical things I've learned over the years with anyone who is interested in drawing strength and wisdom from their time with God. I don't think what I have learned is exclusive or comprehensive. It's just things God has taught me in my ongoing quest to know Him more and serve Him with a pure heart.