

Keep Your Vision Alive!  
Proverbs 29:18

"Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight--why the bush does not burn up.' When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am.' 'Do not come any closer,' God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.'"  
Exodus 3:1-5 (NIV)

Fil-Am Church started with a vision. God called a missionary-couple from the Philippines, brought them here to Virginia and planted in their hearts a desire to reach Fil-Ams in this community. Then, they had a son who was so friendly that he captured the hearts of the people who came to their Bible studies. Until the little boy became sick. He was so sick that at the age of 2, he went to be with the Lord. In the midst of the pain and heartache of that event, Fil-Am Church was born.

Since then, this church continued to reach out to people in the community, whether they are Fil-Ams or not. That's why whatever the color of your skin, the color of your hair, the color of your eyes, the color of your teeth, you are welcome in this church. In fact, the vision of this church is to become a church for people from all walks of life in the Metro-DC area.

Well, Woodlands Church, today as we celebrate our 22nd anniversary as a church, I think it's appropriate that we kick off this 50-day faith building journey that will lead us all the way up to Christmas. We're calling it Rise: Seize the Moment; Shatter the Darkness. And I'm so excited about this series for you personally because in this series we're going to learn from God's word how to rise to the challenges in our own lives and go to a new level of God's hand of favor and blessing and strength, and it's going to be life changing as God is going to help us get over some of the obstacles that have been holding us back, and I'm excited about this for the whole church because we're going to look at how our church with God's vision can rise to the challenges in our world today to seize the moment and shatter the darkness.

But, really, if you're going to rise to the challenges in your life and go to a new level of God's hand of favor and strength upon your life, it all starts with vision. We have to raise up vision. In fact, in Proverbs 29:18 it says,

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Personally, when you have no clear life vision then you fall into this rut of meaningless existence where you're not really living, you're just existing, where you're empty on the inside and you die just a little bit every single day.

And, when a business, a corporation, an organization, even a church has no clear vision, then that organization will eventually die. But the good news is just the opposite is true. I mean where there is no vision, the people perish; but where there is clear vision, the people flourish. When you have a clear vision for your life, you flourish. Your relationships flourish. You flourish in your life with God's hand of favor and blessing. But in an organization when you really know the vision, then the organization flourishes. It's so important to understand that every one of us intuitively knows that God has placed a grand and great vision in our hearts and lives. Every one of us knows that we're down here on this earth for more than just breathing in the air, taking up space. We know that God has a great and personal purpose for us.

And so we're going through life, we're walking through life and we have our sights raised, and we're looking to Christ to really get clarity on that vision that He has for us, that God-sized vision, that personal vision and plan for our lives. And so as we're looking to Christ and we're excited about really getting that vision and we're walking towards Him and we're trying to get clarity on that vision, problems and pressures and pain, difficulties and stresses hit us and knock our heads down until we're no longer looking up with our sights raised to God's vision for our lives but we're looking down at our problems. We're looking down at the difficulties we're facing, and it's really hard to see God's vision for our lives when there are these problems and barriers and difficulties and obstacles around us. So we start looking down and when you walk through life looking down at your problems, you're going to accidentally fall into a rut of meaningless existence and you're going to hit all kinds of obstacles when you're walking through life with your head down.

And by the way, it happens a lot in organizations. You know you're really going for that vision and you're excited about it, but then a problem comes or a difficulty comes or a setback hits and you all look down and everyone in the organization looks down and they think: We've got to fix this problem. We can't think about a big vision. We've got this thing. We've got these problems. We've got these deals. Just the opposite is true. You need to look up and see the big vision or you'll never overcome your obstacles. But we get our heads down and we get down into it, and it causes us to fall into this

meaningless existence of just existing and forgetting about the grand plan.

Or, we go through life and we fail, we mess up, we sin. You know, we blow it; and then instead of looking forward to what Christ has for us, instead of looking up with our sights raised up to see the God vision for our lives, we start looking back, looking at our past failures. We start walking through life backwards. When you walk through life backwards, you're going to hit a lot of obstacles. You're going to experience a lot more failures, and God wants us to turn around and stop looking at the past and stop looking at the ground of our problems and start looking up at His power and He begins then to clarify the vision in our lives.

But when we're walking through life looking down at our own little problems or looking back at our past failures and not looking at God's vision for our lives, God has to do something to get our attention, to get our heads up so we'll raise our sights because we're walking through life looking down and we think that's normal or we're walking backwards through life looking at the past and we think that's normal. And so God has to do something drastic many times to get our attention to make us look up just to get our attention, not look at Him but just to look up to raise our sights, and that's what He did with Moses.

Moses was wandering through the wilderness just existing, not really living. He was tending some sheep, and he knew that wasn't his overall purpose in life. He felt like this was just a purposeless existence, but he was going through the motions with his head down looking at his problems and obstacles, and he didn't think he could ever look up again to see God's great vision for his life. He was looking at the past, all of his failures, and so he was just going through the motions, and God had to get his attention, and God got his attention and made him look up. Let's look at it.

I want you to open your Bibles to Exodus Chapter 3 beginning with verse 1. Would you stand in honor of God's word? And I want to welcome all you guys worshiping with us at our satellite campuses and everyone worshiping with us through our broadcast and online ministry around the world and everyone here in The Woodlands. Just follow along with me.

"Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight--why the bush does not burn up.' When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am.' 'Do not come any closer,' God said. 'Take off

your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

Dear God, I know that today we're standing on holy ground, not because of this building or because of this land, but because you are here right now and you are here to do miracles in our lives, and Lord, I know that the first thing you have to do in order to smash down the obstacles that we face to take us to a new level of your favor and influence and strength in our lives is to raise up our heads to keep us from looking down at our problems or looking back at our failures, to look at you. So I pray you would raise our sights in the next few moments to get our eyes back on your vision for our lives so that it will take us over our obstacles and into your power and plan. For it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

You can be seated.

I want you to underline this sentence in that passage: When the Lord saw that he [Moses] had gone over to look at it! So Moses had been walking with his head down, just walking through life tending these stinking, smelling sheep, feeling like there was no purpose for his life, and God gets his attention through a bush that was on fire but didn't burn up. He has this burning-bush experience. I think that would get my attention. Wouldn't it get your attention? A bush on fire and the flames burning high and hot but the bush never burning up. God had to do something drastic.

Now it wasn't that He got Moses to look up to see this great vision for his life. He just had to get his attention, and sometimes God just has to get our attention first. And maybe it's through the fire -- some things you only learn from being burned -- and God allows us to get burned to get our attention. Then He can take us and help us look to the vision that He has for our lives. That's what He did with Moses. But I want you to also underline the sentence: "God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' God calls him by name. God was saying, 'Moses, I want you to know that yes, you failed miserably, and yes, you've got problems, but I just want you to know I know your name, I know where you are. You're out here in the desert, hardly anyone out here. You're out here in the desert, but I've come out here to tell you that I haven't forgotten you. I still have a plan for your life. You haven't blown it. You haven't looked down too long to where you can't look up. I still have a plan and purpose for your life. I know your name. I know where you're at; I knew you were out here in the desert. I have been following you. I know right what you're going through. I know your pain. I know your failures and sins. I know you, and I love you, and I have a word for you.'"

You know so many times people will say to me, "Kerry, you must have been

reading my email. How did you know I was going through this? That message was just for me." And some of you are thinking that right now. This message is just for me. I needed this. Wow. How did he know this is what I needed? I don't, but God does; and God knows you by name. He knows your number. He knows what you're going through. Maybe no one else cares, but God cares; and God has a word for you today. He still has a plan. He still has a God-sized purpose for your life. It's not too late. As long as you are breathing, God still has a plan for you' and He wants you to look up and to see that plan. He wants to get your attention so that He can do something great in your life.

The problem is, like Moses, when we begin to look up, the vision is really blurry. It's really hard to see God's great and grand vision because of all of our problems and sins and faults. It's hard to see this vision clearly, and God here says four things to Moses, and these four principles are how you see God's vision for your life clearly, and once you see God's vision for your life clearly and you step toward it, then God takes you over and through and around some of the obstacles you never thought you could get through and He takes you to a new level. So let's look at it.

## 1. DON'T FENCE GOD IN

Well, the very first one is don't fence God in. You can't put fences around what you want God to do in your life. In fact, many people have a little white picket fence and they say, "God, come over here and stamp my little American dream. This is the dream for my life, my family. This is what I want. We have this little dream and this little plan all figured out, the American dream. God, stamp your approval on it." But, I want you to know God's dream for your life is not the American dream. God's dream for your life is so much more, so much deeper, so much more significant, but many times we try to put a picket fence around God or we'll try to put a fence around God and say, "This is what I think is best, God." But, God hates fences.

In Exodus 3:8 God says,

"So I have come to rescue them. And lead them out of Egypt into their own good and spacious land. Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You will lead My people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

Underline the words spacious land.

Now in the Old Testament whenever God talked about spacious land or enlarging your territory or expanding your land, there was always a deeper

meaning as well to that. Sure it meant physical land, but it also represented someone's influence, someone's opportunities and blessing and strength. So God says to Moses, "I want to expand your land. I want to increase your influence and your opportunities and your blessings and your strength for my glory so you can make a difference in this world." God wants to expand your land. God wants to expand your land to lead you into good and spacious land. He wants to expand your level of influence and opportunity and blessing and strength so that you can make a difference in this world for His glory. That is God's general vision for your life. And He said, "I want you to be the leader. I'm going to deliver the people, but I want you to be the leader. I choose you. Out of my mercy and grace, I choose you."

And God says to you, "I choose you. I want you to be a part. I want you to play an amazing part in my plan that'll be done through my power and my way." He gave Moses this amazing opportunity, and God gives us this amazing opportunity and He doesn't say, "I'm going to come over and stamp approval, my approval, on your plan. You're going to leave and come over here and join me in what I'm doing." You see God does what He wants, when He wants, how He wants; and we have to get all the fences out so that we say, "God, I want your God-size vision for my life. I'm sorry that I've been putting fences on it. You do what you want because you know what's best. I trust you that you know what's best, that you know how to accomplish what you've called me to do, and so I'm not going to put fences on it anymore."

God hates fences, and God really sings that old Cole Porter song Don't Fence Me In.

I want to ride to the ridge where the west commences  
And gaze at the moon 'till I lose my senses  
I can't look at hobbles and I can't stand fences.  
Don't fence me in.

You didn't think I'd sing it, did you? No. You know the song. Don't Fence Me In. God says, "Don't fence me in."

Now somehow about, I don't know, maybe ten years ago or something, somebody at a sports event thought of this amazing, creative thing. Maybe it was at a basketball game or a football game, but now you see it everywhere. You know, some drunk guy and his buddies ripped up his picket fence in his front yard and someone carved out a D and they went down to the game. D fence, D fence, D fence, D fence, and now it's been going on for so long, but people still do it. I wish it would die out like the wave, but it just keeps coming to life like a bad horror film. It's like someone up there is

going, "Look how creative I am. D fence, D fence." It's amazing. I mean it's everywhere -- all different shapes and sizes, and you know, all different colors and team colors, D fence, D fence. But I want you to remember this message. I want you to remember this principle. Don't fence God in because the chant that God has is this. No fence. No fence.

So what I want you to do right now is pretend like you're at the ball game, and I want you to chant this with me. You ready? No fence. No fence. No fence. No fence. No fence. And we're not talking about the Texans defense the last several weeks. Okay? We're talking about â€¦ they'll get it corrected, don't worry â€¦ we're talking about God hates fences. He says, "You can't put fences on me if you want my vision to be clear in your life. You can't put parameters on it. I'm going to do what I want to do when I want to do it, how I want to do it, because I know what's best. Trust me. I'll take you to places you never dreamed you could be, but there are no fences."

Now we tend to put several fences on God, the same fences that Moses put up on God.

- The fence of my faults

First is the fence of my faults. In Chapter 4, verse 10 it says,

"But Moses pleaded with the Lord, 'O Lord, I'm just not a good speaker â€¦. I'm clumsy with words.'"

So Moses says, "God, you know my name; but you must not know anything about me because I'm a terrible speaker. I'm clumsy with words." Some scholars think he may have had a speech impediment that he stuttered, but he was definitely not a good speaker. He said, "I'm not gifted in the area of speaking, and you're calling me to lead hundreds of thousands of people and to speak before Pharaoh. I can't do it. You must not know me, God. I've got a weakness. I've got a lot of weaknesses but one of my big ones is public speaking."

And I have to say that all the surveys say that the number one fear of most people as they take these surveys and write down their number one most fear is the fear of public speaking. It always comes out ahead of the fear of death. So what that means is if I were to come to you and say, "Hey, I need you to preach next weekend for me in front of 18,000 people on the weekend, and by the way, the service will go out to over four million around the world through our broadcast ministry, and I need you to do that." That means that you'd rather run outside and get hit by a truck if you're the

average person. I know there are two or three of you that'd go. "Yes, finally, I've got a word from the Lord, and I've been wanting to preach it, but they just won't let me on the stage and you scare me. I want you to know that." You know who you are.

But God says, "Moses, you don't get it. You don't understand. I know your weakness, but I'll take that and I'll show my strength." And God always asks us to do things that we can't do in and of our own strength because then He gets the credit. And God's vision for your life â€¦ He'll ask you to do some things that you can't do in order so you'll learn to trust Him, and He does it, and it builds your faith, and you see God do it, and He gets all the credit. How do you know if a vision is from God? It'll be so big that you can't do it in and of your own strength. It'll be so big that only God can do it; otherwise, it's not a God vision. It's just a little man-made vision.

And I know I've said this before, but so many times that I've said it, people don't believe me that my number one fear when I was in high school was the fear of public speaking. I was so shy, so quiet; and if I had to give a speech in speech class or an oral report, an oral exam, oh, I would just start sweating. My hands would sweat and I was just like, "Lord Jesus, please don't let them call on me today." I would never raise my hand and volunteer, and I would just pray that the bell would ring so that I wouldn't have to do that because I had such a fear of speaking in front of people, and if you had told me that "One day you're going to be speaking in front of thousands" I would have said, "Shoot me now." You know, I mean "That's horrible, that's horrible. I can't imagine a life like that. It sounds terrible to me."

Now my wife on the other hand was so outgoing, so popular and loved to speak in front of people and had this outgoing personality, and I was real quiet, withdrawn. But you know what I discovered? When God called me to preach and put that call, that dream, that desire in my heart, then as I started stepping out and I taught a little Bible study of about 20, and I was really nervous. It's like, "God, I can't speak in front of them" but it helped me turn to the Lord and say, "God, I need you. You're going to have to do this Lord. I need your power." And He would speak through me, and it would build my faith. And then I remember when Chris and I went to our first church to pastor this first little church and I preached some of the worst sermons ever preached and they loved us anyway.

And I remember my very first sermon. Chris sat on the front pew, that front row there, and she just was doubled over laughing most of the sermon and was so encouraging, and she recorded it on one of those old tape recorders. She'd go, "This is awesome. I'm going to play this back for you." I mean I

said such powerful, spiritual truths like "When Jesus said that, He didn't just say it, he said it." Said what? Wait a minute. Somehow, anyway, you know it, you know what I'm saying. And the nine people in the congregation that were over 95, that were rooting me on, they were like, "What are they teaching these kids at seminary? That was so deep, I didn't even get it. I don't think they're speaking English anymore."

And Chris recorded that, and she was just doubling over, and I looked at her like "What did I just say that didn't make any sense?" and she was just like looking down. And she said, "Kerry, God's going to use you greatly one day, and I want to save this because if you ever get the big head, if you ever get proud, we're going to play this." And I said, "No need, no need, that's for sure." But every time I would step out in faith and I'd be, "God, I'm nervous. I can't do this. You're going to have to do it" and then He would fill me up, and He would do it, and He would build my faith. God always asks you to do things that you can't do in and of your own strength so that you'll have to trust Him and so that He'll get the credit, and it builds your faith. That's what's going to happen over the next fifty days in our faith-building challenge, this journey we're going to be on. God's going to build your faith. Every little step you take, He's going to build your faith as you see God come through and work miracles, and He's going to take you to that spacious land that He has for you, but first we have to see it.

Well, there's the fence of my faults, and by the way, Moses didn't realize that whatever God asks you to do, He gives you the strength to do. Whatever God asks you to do, He gives you the power to do. Where God guides, God provides. God's not going to ask you to do something then not give you the power to do it.

- The fence of my fears

But then there's another fence Moses put up that we tend to put up: the fence of my fears. In Exodus 4:1 it says,

"Moses answered, 'What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you?'"

He was afraid of what the people would think about him. That's because he was insecure. Insecurity breeds fear. Fear comes from insecurity. And it's because he had the wrong focus his insecurities came out of the wrong focus. In fact, in Exodus 3:11 it says,

"But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go? [And later in the passage] God said, "I am who I am.""

So Moses had the wrong focus. He was saying, "Who am I? I'm just an ordinary, imperfect person. You need someone great to do this great task. You need someone talented to do this great task. You need someone so spiritual to do this great task. Who am I?" And God says, "You're asking the wrong question. It's not about who you are. It's about who I am. And by the way, my name is I am. I am whatever you need so get your focus off your inadequacies and focus on my power. Get your focus off your failures and start focusing on my plan." God's name is I am. God says, "Just tell them I am sent you." He was saying "I'm not the God of the past. My name is not I was. I'm not the God of the future. My name is not I will be. I'm the God of the present right now in your life. I am whatever you need right now." You can just put I am as God's name and then add a blank to it. I am whatever you need. Just fill in the blank.

Are you anxious and filled with worry? God says, "I am your peace; call upon me." Do you need financial provision? God says, "I am your provision." I mean all through the Old Testament God's name was I am, and then you fill in the blank. I am Shalom, Jehovah Shalom. It just means peace. I am your peace. On and on, you know, Jehovah Rapha just means I am your healer. Do you need healing? God says, "I am your healer." Do you need provision? God says, "I am your provision." Are you weighed down with guilt? God says, "I am your forgiveness. I am your righteousness." God's name is God's character. He says, "I am whatever you need." So what do you need right now? God's name will meet your needs. "I am whatever you need."

- The fence of my failures

But then there's the fence of failures, and this was the big one in Moses' life. In Exodus 4:13,

"But Moses said, 'O Lord, please send someone else to do it.'"

Moses was saying, "Okay, I'm out of excuses, but I can't do this." Moses was saying, "Don't you know my story, Lord? I was born to a Hebrew slave, and she protected me and didn't want me to get killed by Pharaoh who was killing all the young Hebrew boys, and so she put me in a little basket, floated me down the Nile River, and who picked me up? The princess, the king's daughter -- she adopted me. I came into the house of the king." You see Moses was raised in the palace as the prince of Egypt. He had all this wealth and power and influence and fame, but in his heart he knew that God's dream for his life was much more than that. God's dream for his life was not an empty dream, a selfish dream. He knew that he was called to be

the deliverer of his people out of bondage, and it hurt him deeply when he saw his people being hurt.

And so one day, when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, he took matters into his own hands. You see Moses felt that dream that God had placed in his heart and he felt like he had the power, the money and the influence to do it. So he set out to do it, and he killed that Egyptian guard, and then he tried to hide it. But word started going around. "Who killed that guard? The prince of Egypt, the prince of Egypt, the prince of Egypt" and soon it got back to Pharaoh, and Moses had to run for his life into the desert as a failure. He thought he would be the deliverer, but he ends up in the desert.

Have you ever been in the desert where it feels like God is a million miles away, that maybe God will bless someone else but not you, that maybe God can use someone else but not you because of all your failures, mistakes and sins and you feel like that God is nowhere close, you can't feel His presence and you're just kind of going through the motions because you just don't see God's vision for your life? You feel like God has forgotten you? But God came to him in the desert and called him by name and said, "I haven't forgotten. You're right where I want you to be, but I'm going to smash the fences down in your life because no failure and no fault and no fear is going to keep me from doing what I want to do in your life."

## 2. SURRENDER MY PRIDE AND LEAN ON GOD'S POWER

No failure is going to destroy God's purpose for your life, but God smashes the fences down, and God wants to smash your fences down in our fifty-day journey and expand your land, but I have to come to the second thing. Surrender my pride and lean on God's power.

When God gives us a great vision, He has to take our pride out of it so that He can fill it with His power. God hates pride. He can't fill you with His power when you're full of pride. I can't be full of Christ if I'm full of myself, and so there have been so many times where God has knocked the pride right out from under me and I fall to my knees and there on my knees trusting God, praying to Him, seeking Him and His power, then He raises me up to do what He's called me to do, and He gets the credit.

But so many times pride gets in the way. God can't use me when I'm proud. God can't use you when you're proud. He can work around just about anything but pride, no way. He's got to knock the pride out of us so that He can use us and that's what He did with Moses, and so several years later as Moses was the great leader, in Numbers 12:3 it says,

"Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth."

So Moses is leading thousands, hundreds of thousands of people, the greatest leader on the face of the earth and God says, "Now he's the most humble man on the face of the earth." Why? Because Moses was secure in who he was. You see pride comes out of insecurity. Fear comes out of insecurity. Pride comes out of insecurity. Insecurity is pride because you're focused on the wrong thing; you're focused on yourself and your inadequacies rather than on God and others. So it's pride and it's selfishness, and the reason why Moses had lost all of his pride was because he was now secure in who he was. He was saying, "I'm an ordinary, imperfect person" but that's okay because he was secure in who God is. "God is extraordinary and powerful, and He wants to use me." Moses was emptied of his pride.

Back to the burning bush – the first time God speaks to Moses He says, "Moses take off your shoes because you're on holy ground." He was saying, "Moses I'm going to start stripping you of your pride, and let's start with your shoes. Take off your shoes to remember who you are and who I am. You're not God, I am. Take off your shoes. Don't come close to me. Take off your shoes." God was stripping him of his pride a little at a time. The desert was stripping him of his pride because God had a plan, and God can't fulfill His plan when I'm full of pride.

### 3. LET GO OF WHAT I'M HOLDING ON TO

But it brings me to the third thing: I let go of what I'm holding on to. God asked Moses the all-important question, the same question he asks you, the same question he asks me. Here it is in chapter 4, verse 2,

"Then the Lord said to him, 'What is in your hand?' 'A staff,' he replied. The Lord said, 'Throw it on the ground.'"

So God says to Moses, "What do you got in your hand, buddy?" And Moses says, "Just this old shepherd's staff. It's not big deal." And God says, "Well, if it's no big deal then throw it on the ground and give it to me." It was a big deal because Moses had lost everything, even his pride, and that was a good thing. God had stripped all of it away, but this one thing, his shepherd's staff, he used it every day. It was his security blanket. He used it to tend the sheep, to fight off the wild animals, to protect the sheep. He used it in this little job that he had. The only thing he had left, and so it was a security blanket, and God says, "Throw it down and give it to me."

And God asks you today: What is in your hand? What are you holding on to tightly? What are you trying to control? Is it your business? Is it your family? Is it your finances? Is it that dream? Whatever you hold on to tightly, you crush the life out of it and you do just the opposite of what you're trying to do. And God says, "What are you trying to control? Let go of it. Give it to me because you can trust me with your most valuable possession. You can trust me with your dream. You can trust me with your family. You can trust me with that relationship. You can trust me with your finances. Lay it down. Give it to me."

You see if God asks you to give something and you can't give it, you don't own it anymore, it owns you. You don't control it. It controls you. And God wants you to be at a place where you experience His blessings and He takes you to a spacious land, but we hold on to things that keep us back. It's not even the barriers; it's the things we hold on to, and God says, "Let go of it. You can trust me with it." So to Moses' credit, he throws it down. He lets go of it, and God begins to work in his life.

#### 4. OBEY EVEN WHEN I DON'T UNDERSTAND

When you finally get to the place where you say, "God, I trust you because I know you know what's best" then you move to the last and most important: Obey even when I don't understand. Obey even when I don't understand. Moses throws the staff down, and it turns into a snake, and then he runs off scared. It's a viper, a poisonous snake. He runs off, and then to his credit he comes back and God says, "Pick it up, Moses." And Moses says, "That's a snake, Lord. It's a poisonous snake." And God says, "Yes." And He says, "Pick it up, pick it up by the tail." By the way and Moses is going, "Nobody in their right mind picks up a viper by the tail."

But I'm sure Moses was thinking, Okay, I'm going to do it and he's probably thinking, I'm going to die in the next couple of minutes. I've seen vipers bite the sheep and they die in just a couple of minutes. This is a very poisonous snake and so I mean, I know it's probably going to bite me and I'm going to die right here in the desert but who cares? I've got nothing to lose. I could be living out here for the rest of my life with no purpose. Maybe God will come through; I've got nothing to lose. Sometimes when you're at a place where you've got nothing to lose, that you give it all away, and God gives you everything that you ever dreamed. God gives you everything that you really needed.

We hold onto things that we don't need, and we miss out on the things that we need, and God is saying, "If you'll just give me those things, I'll give you

everything that you deeply desire." And so Moses though, even though he doesn't understand it, he reaches down and he picks up the snake, and it turns back into a shepherd's staff, and that's a great principle because God's word is filled with things that I don't always understand and when I learn to obey even when I don't understand it. We want to say, "God, explain that to me because I don't really agree with that one so you're going to have to go through all that one with me to see if I decide if I believe I want to do that." And God says, "No, you obey; then you'll understand. You take a step of faith and then I part the sea and you'll understand, but you've got to obey first."

God tells us to give ten percent of our income and we're like, "Now, why is that God? What's the deal on that?" And God tells us all through scripture it's all about He wants you to put Him first in an important area of your life. God says, "Put me first in your marriage, in your family, in your dream, in your business, give me your business." "But God, that's my business. You don't know anything about my business." And God says, "I know everything about everything. Trust me."

And so when we throw it down and we obey, even when we don't understand it, God blesses. Obedience brings blessing because we've come to the place where we know that God knows better than we know, and when we don't obey and when we don't understand it, we're saying, "God, I'm not quite sure you know what you're doing as God. I think I could probably play God a little better than you do" and God refuses to bless that, but Moses picks it up. It says in Exodus 4:4,

"So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned into a staff in his hand."

So he obeys God, and God gives him the staff back, but it's no longer an old shepherd's staff. It's no longer an old piece of wood. It's no longer a stick. God takes that ordinary shepherd's staff and He does what he does with everything that we give to Him. He put His hand of favor on it. He puts His divine anointing on it, and He gives it back, and it's different. It's forever different.

By the way, when God asks you to give something, He asks us to really give over everything to Him, to surrender everything. When we do that and we lay that down, then He'll either give us back something better. He's protecting us or he'll give it back to us, and he'll take the snake out of it, the selfishness out of it, the pride out of it, the poison out of it, and He'll give it back to us totally anointed and divine, a whole other level of God's strength and blessing. So He gives it back to him, but it's no longer an old shepherd's

staff. It becomes the almighty staff of miracle-working God. It's the same staff that Moses used to touch the Nile River and then it turned to blood, the same staff he used to bring about all the plagues on the Egyptian slave holders. It's the same staff that he used to raise up and he parted the Red Sea with God's power. The same staff that he would raise over the enemies of God, and God would win the victory. It was no longer an old, ordinary, shepherd's staff; it became the almighty, miracle-working staff of God. It's amazing what God does when we give something to Him. God can take an ordinary person and do something extraordinary with her, with him. God can take ordinary people like you and me and do something extraordinary if we give ourselves totally to Him.

I want you to look at this last verse. Ephesians 3:20. This is the verse God gave me for you.

"Now glory be to God, who by His mighty power at work within us is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of-ininitely beyond our highest prayers, desires, thoughts, or hopes."

That's the God we serve. The greatest thing you'd ever think of, the greatest dream you could ever have, God has a bigger plan. It's His plan, and it's for His glory; but it's to expand your land, expand your influence, opportunity, strength, blessing and favor to make a difference in this world for His glory, and that's when you finally come alive. That's the story of Woodlands Church, folks.

You know when our church was just starting, Chris and I wrote down a vision for our church, and it was all we could believe God for, and God just did all that and so much more because we didn't have a whole lot of faith, but God began to clarify the vision, and then three years ago we continued that vision and we wrote after your verse there in Isaiah 61 you see that the next part of the vision that we wrote down three years ago. That we're going to raise up the gospel of hope all over the world and we're going to raise up the poor and powerless, three million poor and powerless that we're going to bring out of poverty with God's power and God's doing great things there through our ministries and projects that are scalable, reproducible and impactful that don't give a hand out but a help up. And we're going to raise up the next generation through our children's and student ministries and our brand new Woodlands seminary. We're raising up the next generation to change the world, and those dreams are being fulfilled because they're inspired by God.

Over the next twenty years, God wants to do far beyond anything I could ever dream of. It's His church. It's His dream that we get to be a part of.

And by the way, did you realize what an amazing time this is to be alive? You know I hear people say, "Well, I don't know what's going to happen with our kids and grandkids because of all the evil in the world and the problems in the world, and I don't know if they're going to have any opportunity." And I always say just the opposite. There's so much evil and there are so many problems and so many difficulties in our world today, so many wars and on and on it could go, but I say this, "This generation has the greatest opportunity in the history of the world to be the light of Christ to a dark world." I always just say about our kids and grandkids, I just tell them, "Man, you're lucky. You're blessed. You're blessed. We are living in strategic times." And then we tell them, "Seize the moment and shatter the darkness. God can use you."

Seize the moment and shatter the darkness. You can either rise up in faith at a time like this or you can shrink back and hunker down in fear. But God says, "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples but the light of the Lord is on you. The hand of God's favor is on you. Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

So you have a choice in your personal life, in our church, and did you realize that Jesus in Matthew said, "Hey, one day I'm going to come back, guys." He was telling the disciples and they said, "Well, what are the signs? What are the signs that you're coming back?" He said, "Oh well, there'll be a lot of earthquakes. You'll read about a lot of earthquakes. There'll be a lot of earthquakes all over, but don't worry about that. That's just the birth pains. That's just the beginning. That's not the end. And then there'll be a lot of wars, all these wars and rumors of wars starting and people being displaced. There'll be all this stuff happening but don't get worried about that because that's just the early birth pains."

And then He says, "There'll be diseases that can't be cured. There'll be plagues and all kinds of stuff, but don't worry about that. That's just the beginning." And then He says, "There'll be a lot of people with an upside down world view. They'll think what's wrong is right and what's right is totally wrong, and they'll say that they're a God, there's no God, be your own God, do what you want." And He said, "That'll happen all over the place, but don't worry about that because that's just the beginning of the birth pain."

But then He said, "But here's the big sign. The gospel will be preached to every nation. Then the end will come. Boom. Drop the mic, Jesus. I'm out. It's over." The gospel will be preached to every nation, and that means

people groups. That word in the original language, people groups "and then I'm coming back to take my people home." In His mercy, He's saying, "I want everyone to hear the good news of my mercy and grace. I want everyone to know."

Now here's the interesting thing that involves you. You're the first generation in the history of the world since the beginning of this world, since the beginning of humanity, you're the first generation to be alive at a time where Christ could come back because it's the only time in the history of the world where it's possible for the gospel to be heard in every nation and every place around the world because of technology. Even in our own ministry, you know, I mean we hear all the time about people all over the world, it's like four or five million people all over the world in places you wouldn't believe, you know, that have that little mobile phone. It's crazy. Or they're watching on television somewhere out in the desert. It's amazing what God is doing. We're at the most exciting time to be alive in the history of the world. There's darkness everywhere, yeah, but we have the answer. Politicians don't have the answer because the real problem is the heart; the human heart is evil and needs to be redeemed.

Politicians and government can't solve the problem of empty hearts and lives and meaningless existence, and they can't give anyone purpose or forgiveness. But, Jesus can. We're the hope of the world. You are the hope of the world because we're to be His hands and His feet and His voice and His light, but we can't do it if we hunker down in fear. We rise and we shine and the glory of the Lord and His favor is on you to bring you into that spacious land.

I want us to do something right now. Let's rise. Stand up right now. In our time of commitment I want you to sing because if we're going to turn back the darkness and go to new levels in our own lives and in our church, it's so important that we give Him everything we are. And I've always said that it's not that you need to love God more, it's just you need to know how much God loves you because when you know how much God loves you, you throw everything down you're holding onto too tightly. When I remember how much God loves me that He gave His life for me and someone who loves me that much and He knows what's best for me and so I can trust Him with everything so I can give it all to Him and then He takes the pride out of it and gives it back and it's to be used in a whole new way, for a whole new purpose, and so let's just give Him everything. Sing this song to Him with everything and give Him everything and thank Him that He's the light and His hand of favor is on you. It says, arise, shine for the light has come and my light and glory is on you. It's on you, but you have to stand and accept it, and you have to surrender and experience it. Let's do that right now.

Let hope rise and darkness tremble  
In Your holy light  
Every eye will see Jesus our God  
Great and mighty to be praised

Let hope rise and darkness tremble  
In Your holy light  
Every eye will see Jesus our God  
Great and mighty to be praised

God of all days  
Glorious in all of Your ways  
The majesty, the wonder and grace  
In the light of Your Name.

Let hope rise and darkness tremble  
In Your holy light  
Every eye will see Jesus our God  
Great and mighty to be praised

With everything, with everything  
We will shout for Your glory  
With everything, with everything  
God we will shout forth Your praise

With everything, with everything  
We will shout for Your glory  
With everything, with everything  
God we will shout forth Your praise

With everything, with everything  
We will shout for Your glory  
With everything, with everything  
We will shout forth Your praise

Our hearts they cry, be glorified  
Be lifted high above all names  
For You our King with everything  
We will shout forth Your praise

Oh we praise you Lord  
Oh we love you Lord  
With everything we praise you.

Yeah, let hope arise

Let hope rise and darkness tremble  
In Your holy light  
Every eye will see Jesus our God  
Great and mighty to be praised

God of all days  
Glorious in all of Your ways  
Oh the majesty, the wonder and grace  
In the light of Your Name.

I want you to be seated because I want us to do something really powerful here in our time of commitment. It was 22 years ago, this day, November the 7th at midnight when our little core group of eight had sacrificed, and we spent all of our money on renting the John Cooper Elementary Lower School auditorium and all the children's equipment and sound equipment, and we sent out an invitation to the community, and our little team had sacrificed by working so hard for weeks, and we had been there until midnight trying to get the whole thing set up for the church. We put a hundred chairs out, couldn't believe God for any more than that. And I remember that night Chris and I were on the stage of that little lower school auditorium and we said, "You know what? It's midnight. We're going to be here in just a few hours, our very first service and so let's just pray. And we grabbed hands and we got on our knees on that little stage and dedicated the church to God, and I want us right now to dedicate the next 20 years to the Lord; and if you are able, would you get on your knees right now, and I'll tell you this. I know it's almost impossible in those chairs so don't feel bad if you don't. Okay? It's not a spiritual thing, and some of you just have knee problems, and it takes me a lot longer to get up from my knees than it ever has before so I get it. Don't worry about that, but if you can do that, I want to lead us in a prayer for you and for our church.

Lord, just like we did 22 years ago, we kneel down and we acknowledge that you're God and we're not, and we dedicate, Lord Jesus, our lives, our families, our businesses, our church to you, and we just ask you to do all that you want, nothing more, nothing less, just like the prayer we prayed 22 years ago. God, you're going to have to do it. I pray that you would bring people and that you would do all that you want beyond anything we could ask, think, dream of or imagine, beyond our highest hopes and prayers and thoughts, and I pray you'd bring one person to know you as Lord and Savior so their eternal destiny would be forever changed and then it will all be worth it. And Lord you know how 168 people came to that first service and four people prayed to receive you into their life and their eternal destiny was

changed and it was all worth it. And then we just prayed the next week: Lord, if one more person comes to you, it's all worth it, and that's what we pray today. Lord, if just one more person comes to know you today, it's all worth it, but we commit our church to you and ask you to do everything you want to do beyond anything we could ask, think, dream of or imagine, Lord, to bring glory to you, honor to you and change this world and light, Lord, our hearts. Help us seize the moment and shatter the darkness for your glory, and I pray for every person here who's going through a deep darkness and pain. Maybe it's the darkness of depression. Maybe it's the darkness of anxiety. Maybe it's a darkness of just real difficult days. Maybe it's the darkness of divorce. They're going through such pain, Lord. Let them know how much you love them. Bring healing to them, and I pray that you would, great I am, be their peace. I know you say "I am your peace." Great I am be their provision for you say, "I am your provision." Lord, be their power. "I am your power." We need you great I am. We need you. We thank you. I pray that those who have never received you would pray this prayer: Jesus Christ, come into my life and be the Lord of my life, forgive me of all my sins and give me a fresh start. Help me to stop looking backwards and looking down but to look to you. Help me to not look to others for my approval but to look to you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

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