

Fire on the Porch!

Raised for Victory:

2 Chronicles 13:2c-15, 24:17-25

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Do you know what the last recorded instructions of Jesus are before his crucifixion? Do you know what last things he told his disciples before he prayed and then was arrested? In John 16:33, Jesus finishes his teaching with these words:

I have told you these things, so in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:33, NIV)

Little troubles don't take much heart. They don't give the conqueror much glory. It is those troubles that threaten your soul, relationships and world. They require heart. In the face of them, you need someone bigger than you to help. You need assurance from God himself to have peace. Jesus' words only make sense when you face challenges greater than your resources and wisdom.

What kind of challenge are you facing right now? Are you seriously threatened? Do you have a fire on your porch? We have such a threat as a church; and though I want to share about this threat in light of the Scriptures, I believe God's answers are not only for our collective life, but they also are for your personal life.

I call this sermon, "*Fire on the Porch*," though that title dates me [video projection (vp): house with porch]. I grew up in a time when people actually liked to socialize with their neighbors. We built porches so that we could enjoy the outdoors and our neighbors. However,

thirty years ago [vp: house with deck], we began building backyard decks. It was all about enjoying the outdoors in undisturbed privacy. I have to admit that I'm more comfortable in the privacy of a backyard deck than on a front-yard-facing open porch. I suppose I could have titled this message: *Fire on the Deck*; but somehow that seems less urgent. A deck is an add-on, while a porch is part of the house's structure. A deck fire can involve the house if neglected; however a porch fire will burn a house down if it is not immediately addressed [vp: house with porch]. Please understand then, when I talk about a fire on the porch, I'm talking about [vp: project with bullets or numbers] 1) an existing problem that 2) threatens our life together and 3) requires immediate attention.

Before we discuss the fire, we need to think of the house. The house is the place where people live and grow. Some homes exhibit great care and investment. Much is done to make it a healthy environment for living. Other homes are in poor repair and at minimum, need remodeling and updating to be healthy in the present and future. How we address the porch fire is influenced by the house, its occupants first and its nature second. For example, if the house is a hospital, alarms sound and fire-doors close. Since many occupants are difficult to move and could be seriously harmed by relocation, evacuation is limited to the area immediately threatened and sprinklers in the affected sections suppress or deter the fire's progress. If this brick home [vp: brick home] has a porch fire, occupants must be safely evacuate, but there is a good chance much can be saved if appropriate action is taken. The house shows quality investment, but needs immediate and proper action. If this wooden house [vp: dilapidated wood frame] has a porch fire, occupants must be rushed out of the structure because the danger of injury or death is imminent. There is a possibility that the house can be saved, but whatever happens it will need a great deal of repair... even if the fire is contained and extinguished.

The fire on the Bethany porch is the gap between our projected income and expenses along with the debt we've incurred. This fire has not been neglected. It has been given attention. Many have given sacrificially. Some of our financial reports are amazing. They are even thrilling when you see the generous second mile giving. We truly are blessed as a church family with deeply committed brothers and sisters in Christ. The fire grew in 2008 and 2009, and it flamed up especially this January. However, in February and March our income has matched or exceeded our expenses. To God be the glory!

The Bethany family held small groups during the first week of March so that we could share discoveries about our house and the porch fire, invite response and hear from the Holy Spirit. The small groups were structured so that we would share for a half hour and then listen for a half hour. We (are holding) held the last of these during the Sunday School hour today (in the Emmaus Room).

We recently discovered encouraging news about the Bethany house. We entered into a consultative process that involves over 50,000 churches in 70 countries. The process evaluated our people rather than our programs. We learned about the hearts, minds and actions of Bethany people. That is the true test of discipleship. You see... people grow people. We found that the attitudes and actions of Bethany people are right in the middle of those 50,000 churches. About 20,000 to 25,000 of those churches are trying to grow their people up to (and then beyond) the attitudes and actions of our church family, and we are trying to grow our people up to (and beyond) the attitudes and actions of the people of about 20,000 to 25,000 churches. We found that the average church with our profile is growing numerically and financially. We may not be that new brick house [vp: brick home], but we are far from a fragile, dilapidated structure [vp: dilapidated wood frame]. God is doing a great work in and among us, yet we are threatened.

Being threatened and facing rough challenges are not new experiences for the people of God. Indeed, they are opportunities to reveal both our mettle and the glory of God. God uses these threats and difficult challenges to raise his children for victory.

I was taken by the tale of two kings. Joash was a baby when his father the King of Judah was murdered. Joash's grandmother wanted to rule Judah, so she ordered the execution of the royal household. By marriage, the priest Jehoida was an uncle to baby Joash. He and his wife hid baby Joash until he turned 7 years old. Then with support from the leaders of Judah, they crowned Joash as king and executed his grandmother for her crimes. His kingdom overcame many threats and experienced great blessing until Joash's uncle died. Flattered by some of his government officials and enthralled with his achievements, Joash's heart turned away from fearing and seeking God. His cousin Zechariah, the son of Jehoida the priest prophesied against him. Following the counsel of his officials, he executed the son of the very man who spared his life and gave the kingdom to him. God withdrew his blessing and a small threat, a tiny fire, consumed his house. A small enemy army overpowered and destroyed his great military and severely wounded King Joash. He then was betrayed and murdered by some of his officials.

By logic, Joash's threat should have been eliminated by his actions and resources. However, he missed one thing: the fear of God. He did not truly seek God and his grace. In contrast, King Abijah the grandson of King Solomon faced a huge threat. He was outnumbered two-to-one by the army of his grandfather's enemy, King Jeroboam. Like his great-grandfather David, Abijah believed that God and a little is far greater than the skill of many. He saw the conflict and challenge as an opportunity for the truth of God to be revealed. Do you see the fire on our porch as an opportunity? Do you have a fire on your porch that is an opportunity for the truth of God to be revealed? While King Abijah relied on divine favor, King Jeroboam, who led

the succession of ten tribes from the dominion of David's descendants, relied on conventional wisdom. He setup an ambush of King Abijah's army, so while King Abijah talked about who is God, Jeroboam set a trap. What happened? King Abijah followed to the letter a protocol prescribed in the Bible, and Jeroboam began an ambush. Surprised, Abijah's troops cried out to the Lord. Priests blew trumpets encouraging their faith. They fought brilliantly and routed an army much greater than them. It was a blow out. King Abijah badly defeated Jeroboam, and the latter king never recovered from his defeat.

Brothers and sisters, whatever threat we face, whatever fire burns near, the first and the last thing to do, regardless of our resources and plans, is to seek God. As a church it is fine for us to discuss, seek wisdom, make plans and act. However, what makes our actions successful is the blessing of God. Are you praying about your porch fire? If you are part of our church family, are you praying about ours?

I thought of the different people who live in a house. I saw this little guy flexing his muscles [vp: boy flexing]. I'm sure he can be an encouragement to his dad and mom and a joy to his grandparents, but he probably can do nothing directly to fight the fire. Maybe he can bring a sandwich or drink to those who fight the fire. Maybe he can flex his muscles and refresh their spirits. This grandma [vp: rocking grandma] probably can't directly fight the fire, but she can give words of encouragement and maybe dampen some cloths to soothe and strengthen those who fight.

From the youngest to the oldest, we all can help. Some of us may not have any financial resources to give, but can we not fast, seek God and encourage one another? If you have a porch fire, can we not come alongside you and at minimum seek God's wisdom and blessing? Our threats will bring glory to God if we believe? Let's believe. We are raised for victory!