

April, 2013

Leaving the Door Open

When we hear about Jesus driving out evil spirits, we usually think about an exorcism or some kind of dramatic event unassociated with ourselves. The last thing we consider is that evil spirits might be lurking around inside us. Not us, someone else! However, evil spirits are subtle. They search for open doors in people's lives that they can enter. Killing starts with anger, fear produces a need to control, and cheating often stems from greed. An array of frightening feelings and selfish thoughts can invade a person's life as they begin to say yes to that which can ultimately harm them. But, we are not alone. God is with us. Prayer is a mighty tool for those who believe. It is an indescribable gift from God to keep us centered in his kingdom and equipped to deal with the onslaughts of harmful spirits.

Five years after college, I was relatively content with my business job trading agricultural commodities for Cargill, Inc. in Minneapolis, MN. However, during that time, God came roaring into my life. I was elated with the Good News and grace of our Lord. Eventually, I felt a pull into full-time ministry. One day, after a year or two of attending church, I got up from my trading desk, and announced to my colleagues that I was leaving for San Jose, Costa Rica, where I had enrolled in a Spanish Language Institute for missionaries. Jaws dropped, including my own. I was taking a big leap into the unknown, a brand-new chapter in my life was unfolding. I was determined to follow the Lord wherever he would lead me.



In Costa Rica, I lived with a local family in a humble barrio of San Jose. I loved every second of it. During the day, I attended the language school and was surrounded by 250 missionaries preparing for assignments all over Latin America. I became friends with many of them; in fact, a few began discipling me, helping me read the Bible for the first time, encouraging me in my new faith. One of them, Charlie Nelson, asked me to help him begin a new church in Barrio Cordoba, San Jose. With great humility, I accepted his invitation. Charlie poured his life into me, helping me spread my wings in ministry. One of the things he had me do was memorize 64 passages of Scripture. It was hard, but eventually I committed each of those passages to memory, which was a really good thing, because of what happened one afternoon.

The Bible studies Charlie and I had begun in Barrio Cordoba were going really well; a small congregation was beginning to grow. One afternoon, Charlie asked me to go into one section of the barrio, knock on doors, and hand out flyers, which advertised a Christian movie we planned to show that weekend. As I approached one of the houses, the door suddenly swung open. A middle-aged woman welcomed me warmly and yelled for everyone in her immediate neighborhood to hear, "The North American missionary is here!" She ran to many other houses announcing my arrival. I was stunned. Suddenly, I was the center of attention for her entire neighborhood. She arranged about 30 chairs in her living room, asked everyone to take a seat, then announced, "The North American missionary will now give a sermon!" I could not believe what I had just heard. I had never given a sermon in my life, let alone in a different language!

As I stood there staring at these strangers seated on their simple wooden chairs who were in turn looking silently at me, I remembered one of the Scriptures Charlie Nelson had me memorize. I opened the Bible and began reading the passage. Miraculously, I began speaking in Spanish, explaining the meaning of the passage and how it applied to our lives.

I couldn't believe I was actually making sense to them. In fact, they seemed to really enjoy it. Then, the middle-aged woman stood again and said, "The North American missionary will now pray for my ailing legs." I could not believe how deep I was getting into this situation. She was asking me to pray and heal her!

Everyone rose from their chairs, formed a circle around the woman, and stared at me again, ready to follow any instruction I would give. I took a deep breath in utter disbelief of what was happening. I thought *I was just knocking on doors and handing out flyers* ! I laid my hands on the woman's head, and began praying with all my heart for her healing. The room was filled with the sounds of many other prayers, too. As we were praying, I felt the most wonderful warmth in my heart; a bright light seemed to permeate every corner of the room. I will never forget it.



Suddenly, the woman popped up from her chair in the center of the room and began yelling with joy, "The North American missionary has healed me!" I thought to myself, *Really?* We were all in disbelief and joy. She ran throughout the neighborhood shouting about how God had healed her and that there was no more pain in her legs.

Later that week, she and all her many friends came to our church to watch the film. They wanted to worship and know the one who had healed. They became the core of a thriving new congregation in Barrio Cordoba in San Jose - which is still going strong to this day!

I learned an incredible lesson through that experience, which took place nearly 30 years ago. I learned that God wants desperately to heal people from the many different kinds of illnesses and challenges that confront us each day. But, he needs willing hearts and humble followers to accomplish his goals. Our neighborhoods are filled with hurt and pain. The only thing lacking is our willingness to knock on each other's doors. We are content to live such individual lives in the Western world. And, we struggle to believe that God can heal emotional, mental and physical illnesses in our modern world. We relegate faith and the kingdom of God to the back of the bus when it comes to dealing with diseases and emotional challenges that visit our families and neighbors daily.

We are not without warning. The authors of the New Testament implored us not to be naive. Spiritual naïveté or ignorance is the devil's den. Listen to what the apostle Peter wrote in his first epistle. "Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your Christian brothers and sisters all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering you are."(1Peter 5:8-9)



Peter preaching at Pentecost

Prayer is the key. It is the biggest threat to the work of the devil. Prayer invokes the precious presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Yet, we often neglect to pray or fail to practice it regularly. Could the devil himself be the one behind our increasing trust in ourselves and our secular lives? Most definitely. As spring continues to unfold and summer approaches, let us not forget to pray on a daily basis. May the doors of our homes and hearts be open to God, and shut to the work of evil.