

Ever heard of the The Big Fisherman? A novel, then later a movie with three academy award nominations? It's probably why the world thinks of me as being "big" and a "fisherman". I was a fisherman by trade, but I've always thought of myself as about average physically, which for a Galilean man in the first century was only 5'3" - 140 pounds.

My brother Andrew was the true fisherman in our family. Like the very first fish finder radar. If there were fish to be caught, he could tell you where and how deep to throw the nets. My partner, John, was like a concert musician with the nets. We had three kinds of nets and he was a master with all of them. James, James, James. That boy was unbelievable with numbers. The last time we fished together, we had the biggest catch in the history of our little company. He just looked at it and said, "There's 153 big fish. Throw the little ones back." And he was exactly right.<sup>1</sup>

Me, I was the sailor. I could feel the wind before it came up. I always had my sails prepared exactly right, so we always beat the other boats to the places we wanted to fish. When the wind filled the sails, I would just about explode with joy and energy. I felt like I was made - for those moments.

What do you think it felt like to be the first person filled with the Holy Spirit when Jesus sent him back to empower us? Like being a glass that is filled with water? (he simply shakes his head chuckles, then leans in to make the point) It was as if I was a giant sail, and the Spirit ... filling me so full that I just exploded with joy and power. The first thing I thought of was, "In both Greek and Hebrew, the word "spirit" means wind!" Why didn't I expect to feel like this when Jesus promised to send the Spirit to baptize us? Guess I was expecting water, not wind.

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<sup>1</sup> John 21:11

I witnessed some amazing days in my time spent with Jesus of Nazareth... life-changing... I was fishing on the sea of Galilee when he called me to fish for men, I was there when he walked on the water, I was there on top of the mountain when he was transfigured and had a conversation with Moses and Elijah. I was there when he prayed in the garden, when he died on the cross... and I was a witness to his resurrection! But one day was different than all of those!

Early in the morning on Pentecost, only a few days after the ascension of Jesus, many of us were worshiping together. We were praising God and a sound overwhelmed us... as powerful as a tornado. When the promised Spirit came upon us, it was like we had flames of fire all over us. We rushed around, speaking in other languages and accosting everyone to tell them about Jesus. Many of the people around us thought we, the apostles, were drunk even though it was only 9:00 in the morning.<sup>2</sup>

(he sighs, as his mood changes, his voice lowers) The entire time I was with Jesus, I kept a question in my own heart, too embarrassed to ask. It became my secret. I wanted to know, "Why me? Why did you take an average fisherman... on a little lake... in the middle of nowhere... why spend so much of your time and love on him? I'm a nobody...(he chuckles) a loser; I never deserved even a glance. What do you see in me, why do you love me so? Why... me?" When the Spirit filled me, I knew the answer. Jesus never saw me...he saw who I would be when empowered by the Spirit.

What happened next would have put Abraham Lincoln, Billy Graham, or Winston Churchill to shame. Through me, the Spirit delivered the most powerful sermon ever given. For the very first time, the whole Gospel was preached in the power of God's Spirit. For the very first time, people were offered salvation. For the very first time, people repented, were baptized and received the Holy Spirit. For the very first time, the existence of the church was revealed. It gives me chills every time I think about that day.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:13-15

Have you ever read the little book by the prophet Joel? In it, God gave a preview of the future, but it wasn't until Pentecost happened that we understood it. God said from the day of the Lord onward, that his people would have the Holy Spirit poured out on them. Through my sermon, the Spirit revealed that the outpouring would happen for all those who believe in Jesus, repent, and are baptized.<sup>3</sup>

Three thousand people were saved that first day. Every day after that we taught, and spent time with each other. The Lord continued to add to our church every day. You can only imagine the jealousy of the Jewish leaders and the admiration of the townspeople as they saw us growing in numbers, sharing our possessions with each other as we treated one another like brothers and sisters. We were so bold that we just met in the Temple courts right in front of everyone, including the Jewish leaders.<sup>4</sup>

The Spirit was very careful to tend our flock by confirming our work with miracles— such as my healing a man who had been lame from birth. This really confounded the Jewish leaders. They wanted us to stop talking about Jesus, but the miracle spoke for itself to both them and the people.

But it was probably more meaningful that the Spirit confirmed our work by giving us powerful words to speak. Healing the lame man gave us opportunity to speak to all of the crowd nearby. By that time, we had about five thousand full-time believers in Jerusalem. Even so, the Jewish leaders grabbed John and me to threaten us to stop talking about Jesus and his resurrection. We preached the gospel so powerfully to them that they couldn't do anything but listen to us, argue among themselves, and let us go with some empty threats.<sup>5</sup>

It was clear to the believers, the people of Jerusalem and the Jewish leaders that the Holy Spirit had filled us with the power to share the Gospel and grow God's kingdom. We were beginning to understand why Jesus was so anxious to send the Holy Spirit to help us.

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:16-39

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:41-47

<sup>5</sup> Acts 3, 4

I usually try to skip this next story, it's painful. One of my claims to fame is that I once was the world's biggest hypocrite. There is no other way to describe a man who three times denied Jesus, a fact I'm reminded of every time I hear a rooster crow. I know that my Lord specifically forgave me,<sup>6</sup> but that does not negate the fact that I once was the world's biggest hypocrite. I don't use that word lightly. The word was mostly used to describe Greek actors who pretended to be someone they were not. Jesus made the word famous because he accused his enemies, the Pharisees, of being hypocrites.

I mentioned before that the Holy Spirit protected the early church by confirming its validity through miracles and powerful preaching. He also protected the church from potentially destructive new members. Our new church members shared many of their goods in common. One way that happened was for property owners to sell what they owned, and then share the money with the rest of the believers as they had need. A few of our brothers and sisters were easily led into jealousy of the members who received recognition for sharing so generously.

One of our couples, Ananias and Sapphira, conspired together to sell some land and then give *some* of the proceeds to the church, while pretending that the amount they gave was *all* of what they had received. They did not commit a sin by giving less than they received because it was theirs to start with, they committed a grave sin by lying to Holy Spirit. Because of their sin... and hypocrisy, they were both killed by the Spirit. Because of the Spirit's harsh response great fear and respect seized the whole church and everyone who heard the story.<sup>7</sup> It's painful for me to tell (he pauses, shifts uncomfortably) I was the one who had to reveal their hypocrisy and announce their sentences of death.

The Holy Spirit acted more and more powerfully in our early church. All of the apostles healed people and performed many signs and wonders. Crowds gathered up the sick and demon-tormented people they knew, and all of them were

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<sup>6</sup> John 21:15-19

<sup>7</sup> Acts 5:1-11

healed. The Spirit acted so powerfully that even people who were touched by my shadow were healed. (shakes his head) This, of course, made the Jewish leaders crazy with jealousy. They arrested all of the apostles and put us in jail. But in the night, an angel of the Lord came and released us.<sup>8</sup>

(he shakes his head and remembers) The fury of the leaders the next morning when they sent to the jail for us —. The jail doors were locked, but we were gone! They thought they were angry before, but they exploded when they found that we were outside in the Temple yard preaching about Jesus just as the angel had instructed us. Talk about a slap in the face! And, when they called us in to put us on trial, we just preached to them again! Finally, Gamaliel, the finest teacher in Israel, gave them good advice. He said that if our actions were not of God, we would fail and go away. However, if our actions were of God, that they would be fighting God if they tried to stop us. They couldn't just give up that easily though, they flogged us and threatened us to make us stop preaching. However, that just encouraged us to do more for the Lord.<sup>9</sup>

(he yawns) I'm just about ready to quit talking. I don't have the stamina that I had as a younger man. I don't want to take the time to tell you about all the other healings I was empowered to do, or even about the time I raised a woman from the dead. But let me tell you one last story. You know that I was a Jew. Not a very educated Jew, but a Jew, and I was dedicated to the laws of Moses. When Christianity first started, all of its new members were Jewish. We considered Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law, so we continued to practice Judaism as best we could while also being Christians. We had no idea that Christianity would someday be offered to people who were not Jewish?! Oy! (he leans in) That illusion ended several years after Pentecost. Not a few weeks or months like some people visualize, but maybe ten years later!

One afternoon in Joppa, I was giving the prayers of a happy man. All of a sudden, a large sheet of unclean animals came into my view, with God's voice telling me to kill and eat. I was revolted. I said, "I will never do such a thing as eat unclean

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 5:12-19

<sup>9</sup> Acts 5:21-42

food.” God told me not to call anything unclean that he had made clean. That same thing happened twice more. I had learned when things happen in threes, I should pay attention. In my heart, I knew I had done many unclean things in my life. Then, the Holy Spirit told me some people were coming to my house, and I should go with them. By now, you can guess that I didn’t even bother to wait for a knock on the door. I just went downstairs.

The people at the door asked me to come to meet their master, Cornelius, a Roman army commander. Of course, I did so because of the command of the Holy Spirit. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit had me take along some of the brothers from Joppa as witnesses. Long story short, I went the thirty miles north to Caesarea and preached the Gospel to Cornelius and his household and his friends, and they all received the gift of the Holy Spirit. With that sign in place, I baptized them. It was the first conversion of Gentiles, and was the beginning of a new phase of the church.

Oh, the explaining I had to do back in Jerusalem. The matter was so important that my word wasn’t enough, but I fortunately had six witnesses from Joppa. There was no denying what the Holy Spirit wanted, and we had learned better than to argue with Him! From now on, Christianity was available to everyone, not just the Jews.<sup>10</sup>

You cannot even guess the bind that put me in. Here I was living in Jerusalem with the Jews, and I wanted to get along with them so that I would continue to have the opportunity to bring them to the Lord. If I behaved as a Gentile, they would not be able to associate with me. I, and many of the other believers, decided to continue to follow the laws of Moses as much as we could, while preaching the Good News to all of those around us. In our minds, Christianity was still an offshoot of Judaism. In that respect we would find that we were in error.

But we did pray for God to send someone to preach to the Gentiles. We just didn’t know that the price of having that someone would be the life of one of my favorite friends.

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 10, 11:1-18

