

Are You a Spark or a Torch?



Gary Wilkerson May 26, 2014

Is your life a spark or a torch? When it comes to our walk with Christ, the Bible shows us there is a crucial difference between the two, and that difference determines whether our walk is pleasing to him. We see this difference in the lives of Saul and David.

Saul was Israel's first king, and at various times during his reign, the Lord touched him with a powerful anointing. God even caused Saul to prophesy, surprising those around him. "Then the Spirit of God came powerfully upon Saul...When those who knew Saul heard about it, they exclaimed, 'What? Is even Saul a prophet? How did the son of Kish become a prophet?'" (1 Samuel 10:10-11, NLT).

Saul had amazing experiences, moments that sparked the power of heaven in his life, igniting in him a great zeal. "Then the Spirit of God came powerfully upon Saul, and he became very angry. He took two oxen and cut them into pieces and sent the messengers to carry them throughout Israel with this message: 'This is what will happen to the oxen of anyone who refuses to follow Saul and Samuel into battle!'" (11:6-7).

There were many moments of unmistakable anointing in Saul's life. Yet after each one, Saul drifted from his passion for the Lord. One well-known instance is when God commanded Saul to slay Agag, the enemy king he captured, and to destroy all the spoils Israel had taken in battle. Saul neglected to do this, sparing Agag and keeping some of the spoils. Because he forsook the Lord's commands on several occasions, Saul quenched the Holy Spirit's work in his life. Because of his failures to obey, the Lord eventually took the kingdom away from him. Saul's rule was a series of spiritual sparks, moments of victory that never turned into a sustained flame of obedience.

Meanwhile, God raised up David to be Israel's next king. As David's reputation for bold obedience grew, so did the fruit of his obedience, and that made Saul jealous. At one point Saul intended to kill David, trapping him in a cave at Ramah. Yet even then the Lord was gracious, stopping Saul before he could execute his plan. "On the way to Naioth in Ramah the Spirit of God came even upon Saul, and he, too, began to prophesy all the way to Naioth! He tore off his clothes and lay naked on the ground all day and all night, prophesying" (19:23-24).

Simply put, Saul was bent on backsliding, but still the Lord's mercy kept returning to him. Saul kept turning away, however, and eventually he was plagued by a tormenting spirit. He fell into deep, anguished depressions and blinding rages. In those times, Saul's servants called on David to sing and play his harp to soothe the king.

In my counseling as a pastor, I sometimes see a similar pattern in people's lives. They describe vague feelings of being bitter, distraught or discontent. When I ask what's causing it, they're puzzled, saying, "I don't know. I just know something's wrong." As we explore further, it becomes clear they're resisting the refining flame of God's work in their lives.

Like Saul, they experience outpourings of God's Spirit — a spark from heaven while reading a book, worshiping in church, or fellowshiping with friends — and they live off that spark for a while. But soon they "despise" that spark, turning to self-sufficiency. They never stoke the spark into a flame of obedience that will sustain their walk with Christ. Like Saul, they may find temporary solace in the beauty of worship, soothed by the manifest presence of God's Spirit, but that solace doesn't last, and they remain miserable.

I say this humbly, but when it comes to our walk with Jesus many of us are “people of the spark.”

A spark is temporary, lasting only a brief second before going out. Yet that is the purpose of a spark — to ignite things and get something started. For example, a spark is needed on a gas grill to start the flame that does the cooking. But a spark in itself isn't a fire; it won't cook the meat. To live in the fullness that God intends for our lives, we need a flame that is fueled continually by the oil of God's compelling grace.

David's life shows us the difference. He had the same spiritual experiences that Saul did, being touched and anointed by God's hand. Yet the spark that David received was fanned into a flame. “As David stood there among his brothers, Samuel took the flask of olive oil he had brought and anointed David with the oil. And the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David from that day on” (16:13, my emphasis). This last phrase — “from that day on” — shows us the difference in David's and Saul's lives. Once David received a spark from God, he guarded it, stoked it and fueled it. He determined, “I want this spark to increase into a burning flame for the Lord.”

In Psalm 51, David seeks three things that are crucial to the walk of every believer. The first thing David seeks from the Lord is a personal cleansing. He writes, “Don't keep looking at my sins. Remove the stain of my guilt. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me” (Psalm 51:9-10).

When God's spark comes it may soothe us, but it is also meant to create a fire that refines. The flame of his holiness cleanses us of things that don't belong. And as it burns away the dross of sin, it causes us to hate our compromise. It also stirs in us a passion to be holy, so that we say as David did, “Lord, I want to be clean before you, for my spirit to be right.”

Many Christians resist this. Conviction can lead to change, and we may not be willing to change some of our habits or things we covet. David addresses the resistance of his own heart, pleading, “Do not banish me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you” (51:11-12).

Note David's emphasis in this verse on obedience. The apostle Paul could have easily disobeyed God's direction and gone his own way in missions. Paul was chomping at the bit to take the gospel into Asia, but he speaks of being forbidden by the Holy Spirit to go there. Paul knew that if he proceeded on his own, he would grieve the Holy Spirit. He still would have been saved and loved by God, but he would have quenched the Spirit's power to move in his life.

That's exactly what happened to King Saul. As he kept disobeying, the power of God's Spirit to use him kept diminishing. After a while, Saul no longer heard God's voice or was stirred by his Spirit. He had never allowed the initial spark to fan into a cleansing flame.

The second thing David seeks from God is a persistent craving.

David writes, “Do not banish me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me” (51:11). We know that God is omnipresent, but his manifest presence is something else altogether. It's the reason why so many worship services open with choruses imploring the Holy Spirit to come down and make his presence known. David is saying here, “Lord, I need your presence, not just today but tomorrow. I don't want it to diminish because I don't want to return to my lukewarm ways. Please, God, don't take your Holy Spirit from me. Stay with me once I finish worshipping you!”

We all know what this is like. At church and in our fellowship with others we may know God's manifest presence. Sparks fly bringing a sense of fresh, new life and we weep for God to stir us that way every hour of the day. Yet the spark wanes as days pass and we are bombarded by job demands, family obligations, budgets and bills that consume and overwhelm us.

I fall into this cycle every September at our ministry's EXPECT Conference. I am moved and inspired by the godly leaders who speak here, their powerful messages driving me to my knees. Yet last September I made a bold prayer to God: “Lord, if you're not going to sustain the spark, don't give me one.”

I was tired of the rollercoaster, of being sparked without a flame to sustain it, of being on a mountaintop one week only to descend to drudgery the next. So I asked, “God, whatever flame you spark in me, let it grow more and

more. Give me a loyal spirit, as David said. If you give me a spark, turn it into a torch!" God has sustained that flame these past months. The church I lead now has a pastor that burns with prayer for his people. I may not be able to take everyone to coffee or play golf with them, but I have a loyal spirit that intercedes for them day and night to see their lives become all they can be for Jesus.

This leads to the third thing David seeks from God: a powerful witness.

David writes, "Then I will teach your ways to rebels, and they will return to you...Unseal my lips, O Lord, that my mouth may praise you" (Psalm 51:13, 15).

The fire we are given is not meant for our benefit alone. It is meant to burn with zeal for the lost in our nearby community and around the world. If we allow this flame to burn within us, it will compel us to take the good news beyond our church walls. We'll realize, "This fire burning inside me will not be quenched. Woe is me if I keep it inside!"

If there is a true fire burning, it will move us to create a fire in our city.

We simply can't contain our zeal when we've been personally cleansed by God and filled with a persistent hunger to have his life dwelling in us. This makes us want to shout his praises to the world. Some of the best Sunday worshipers I know are those who cry out, "Thank you, Jesus, that today my coworker is sitting next to me in the pew experiencing your amazing love."

If we don't have this kind of fire, it won't matter how powerful our church services are. Heavenly flames could rest on our heads and we could all fall on our faces in awe, but those things alone do not show the power of Pentecost. As long as revival is contained in church, it probably isn't revival. If there is a true fire burning, it will move us to create a fire in our city. Our prayer has to be, "God, if you're going to touch me with a spark, then cause me to speak to sinners. Anoint me to teach them about your love. Send me into the byways with the compelling love of Jesus."

If you see these three things operating in your life, you can know your life is no longer a spark but a torch.

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