

Monday Memo 296: Getting Ahead Of God

I got an excellent comment on last week's Memo about timing and getting ahead of God. Here is what one reader posted:

I usually don't find much to disagree with in your posts, and always appreciate your insights on purpose. But in this case, I have to mention one of the most glaring examples of bad timing and "getting ahead of God" in all of scripture: the birth of Ishmael. I believe we can attempt to fulfill God's purpose in our own strength and time, as Abraham and Sarah did, with an outcome perhaps not as disastrous as theirs.

I've got one more example of what could be considered getting ahead of the Lord and that is when Moses killed the Egyptian in Exodus 2:11-13. So we may as well examine both these examples at the same time. Are these good examples of how we can get ahead of the Lord as we discussed last week? I think not. To find my reasons, you will have to read on.

OLD TESTAMENT

Breaking God's moral laws are never justified in trying to do His will, and that is what both Abraham and Moses did! Let's consider Abraham. God established in Genesis that man will have one wife. Abraham did not obey this law. On two occasions, he put his wife in jeopardy by not identifying her as his wife. On this occasion, he followed the custom of the land and took Hagar, Sarah's maid, and got her pregnant. That's not getting ahead of the Lord; that's sin!

Then what about Moses? Moses killed an Egyptian and he knew it was wrong. How do we know that? Because he "looked this way and that" before he killed the man. Then Moses hid the evidence, yet fled when he discovered that others knew what he had done! He did all this before the commandment came not to kill. Yet Moses had that law written on the tablets of his heart, so when he took another's life, he fled in guilt and fear. Moses didn't get ahead of the Lord. He murdered. It's no wonder that God took him to the backside of the desert for 40 years.

These examples would be the equivalent of someone robbing a bank today to get the money they needed, money for which they were believing the Lord. That would not be getting ahead of God. That would be criminal, and sinful.

These examples are from the Old Testament. I wonder if there are any examples of getting ahead of the Lord in the New Testament? Let's find out.

NEW TESTAMENT

The only example I can think of is when Simon the magician offered a bribe in order to receive the ability to impart the Holy Spirit to others in Acts 8:17–19. I can't think of another example, can you? (If you can, send it along in the comments section on the site where this post is located.) In the New Testament, people were led of the Spirit who was giving them the mind of Christ. They were aggressive and active in their faith. Look at Acts 4. The apostles were standing before the leaders of their day and preaching only a few years after they had met and been with Jesus. They never worried whether or not they were getting ahead of God. They had faith that God was leading them and they stepped out. You need to follow their example. I assume as you do that you will not follow the example of Abraham or Moses--or Simon. Follow the example of Peter, James, John and Paul, who never stopped moving forward, doing what was in their heart to do.

In Acts 16:6–10, Paul was trying to go in one direction and the Lord resisted him. Then Paul finally had a dream that set the correct course for Macedonia and Paul set out immediately. That is the mindset you and I need to have as we pursue our purpose and dreams.

The comment about Abraham and Sarah this week really got me thinking. I am not trying to argue the point with the person who sent the comment, and I hope this will encourage and not discourage you from sending your own from time to time. I stand by my stated premise last week and that is that timing is bunk. Move out in faith and see what happens. Just don't rob any banks as you do. Have a great week!

Monday Memo 297: Anointed

What comes to mind when someone says that a person is "full of the Spirit"? Do you think that person must be in ministry, preaching or prophesying the high things of God? Or do you think that person would be especially holy and sensitive to the Spirit's promptings? In most cases, you would be correct. There is a man in the Old Testament, however, who was identified as being full of the Spirit by God Himself. Yet that man was neither holy nor was he engaged in some kind of priestly ministry. Curious as to who that man was? To discover his identity, you will have to read on.

A SKILLED CRAFTSMAN

The man I am referring to was Bezalel and he is mentioned in Exodus 31:1-5:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship."

Bezalel was a man skilled with his hands to do all kinds of handiwork. Notice that God filled Bezalel with His Spirit to create artistic designs and to work with metals, stones and wood. He was so "anointed" at what he did that God chose him to do the work in the tabernacle, work that would be seen in its fullness by God regularly but by the high priest only once a year. What an honor!

Why do I think this is important for you to see? It's obvious. Bezalel proves that God can equip and anoint you with His Spirit to do things outside of the walls of your church. If this principle holds true today, you can be a banker, military leader, teacher or politician who is full of the Spirit. Imagine being an "anointed" headmistress of a school or head of government full of the Spirit. It's possible! Let me give you another example.

"HIS ANOINTED"

In the book of Isaiah, the Lord refers to Cyrus, a secular king in the following manner:

Thus says the Lord to Cyrus His anointed, . . . I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me (Isaiah 45:1, 4 emphasis added).

Cyrus was a king but was identified as anointed. In other words, God was with him when he ruled and governed. So this leads to the question: What are you anointed to do? Is it teach school? Help the poor? Learn? Preach? Plan conferences? Edit manuscripts? Write? Don't limit your anointing to Church work, but take a look at what you do that, when you do it, you know God helps you.

Bezalel was a skilled craftsman and God was with him. Is God with you when you make jewelry, paint, sing, compose or arrange? If He is, then

you're full of the Spirit when you do those things, no matter where and for whom you do them. You are anointed, just like Bezalel!

I hope you have fun this week in your newly discovered "ministry," for this week's lesson also means that God is with you when you do what you enjoy and are good at. I hope you will learn to increasingly draw on God's help as you carry out your anointed purpose for His world in the coming days. Have a great week as you do!

Monday Memo 298: Don't Eat The Grapes.

In the Old Testament, there was a thing called a Nazirite vow. No, it had nothing to do with Nazareth where Jesus was raised. It was a special voluntary vow that people took and, when they did, they could not eat or drink anything from grapes, they could not cut their hair and they could not go near any dead creature, even family. This week I want to look at the first aspect of that vow and tie it to purpose and then do the same for the last two aspects over the next two weeks. You may want to read Numbers 6:1-7 before you proceed. If not, then read on!

ARTIFICIAL JOY

The person under a Nazirite vow could not eat or drink anything that came from grapes. Why was that? Wine, one of the grape's byproducts, was sometimes symbolic of joy in the Bible. Of course, Nehemiah 8:10 tells us that "the joy of the Lord is your strength." So it seems to me that the Nazirite could not go near anything that would give him or her artificially-induced joy. Are you confused? Don't give up yet.

One means to clarify your purpose is to identify what you enjoy doing. If you don't find what you enjoy doing, then you may try to find joy in other things, even spiritual things. I tried to find joy in being a pastor. The problem was that I was called to church work but not to pastor. I did not find joy as a pastor, but I find joy in what I do today. Because I have so much joy now, I don't need to find artificial joy in what I watch, what I wear, in my relationships or in some activity that is a diversion from every day boredom or joylessness. I am not against relaxation or recreation. They have their place, but they can never give the satisfaction and joy that purposeful activity can.

Someone once said, "Do what you enjoy and you'll never work a day in your life." If you don't find that joy, you will be looking for it somewhere else. That joy will pass, however, and won't sustain you for very long. The Nazirite was to avoid any false high or joy for the duration of the vow. I would suggest that you do the same.

TRUE JOY

Last week, we looked briefly at the issue of anointing, and saw that you can be anointed to do things outside of the Church. I think this phenomenon is described in Hebrews 1:9, which states:

You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.

Joy carried its own anointing, so when you do what you enjoy, you are anointed. That anointed will energize and strengthen you, just like it did Samson, who is perhaps the Bible's most prominent Nazirite. When the "anointing" came on Samson, he could tear a lion apart with his bare hands. What can you do when the Spirit of joy comes on you?

So which will it be, real or artificial joy? Will you pretend to be someone you're not, doing something you don't really enjoy? Or will you have the courage to take your place with the Nazirites through the ages who rejected anything that could make them "high" that wasn't the real thing? I hope you will choose true joy and, if you do, I know you will have a great week like the one ahead of you.

Monday Memo 299: Excellence

It's been a busy week here in Zimbabwe at the Action 2007 Conference sponsored by Celebration Church. I have left the house every day at 8 AM and returned no earlier than 10 PM. Tonight is the last session as I write and everything in me wants to pull an old Monday Memo out of the archive. Yet I can't do that; I won't do that. Why? Because I am committed to excellence and that personal value warrants at least an attempt at writing a fresh Memo. So let's see how it goes.

EXCELLENCE ISN'T PERFECTION

When I was younger, I thought that excellence was perfection. No wonder I was always angry and frustrated. I couldn't seem to get anything done perfectly. Then I had an experience that redefined excellence for me. I was in San Francisco and went into a Nordstrom Department store on a New Year's Eve where I found some dress shirts in my size. That was a big deal, because shirts for me were hard to find. I bought four shirts and my family and I proceeded to shop through the mall where Nordstrom was located. At some point during our shopping, I put my bag down and lost my shirts!

I was upset and immediately began to retrace my steps through the mall, to no avail. Finally I ended up back at the shirt counter in Nordstrom. I asked if anyone had turned in a bag of shirts and the clerk said no one had. When I told her what had happened, she said, "Well, just pick out four more shirts." I explained that I could not afford four more shirts but she insisted and made me identify which four I had originally selected. She promptly put them in a bag, handed them to me and said, "Happy New Year from Nordstrom. There is no charge."

I have told that story and, every time I do, people say, "Wow!" While that doesn't define excellence, it does show that you know excellence when you encounter it.

SO WHAT IS IT?

If excellence isn't perfection, then what is it? It's an attitude, a spirit found among those who go beyond the ordinary, beyond the expectations of others. Excellence isn't doing the minimum requirement, it is going the extra mile, not because you must but because you choose to do so. The sales clerk had an attitude of excellence that turned my imperfection into an memorable moment, one that has lasted me for 20 years. That's the power of excellence.

I have always focused on two passages from the Bible to clarify and frame my value of excellence. The first is in Mark 7:37, which states: "People were overwhelmed with amazement. 'He [Jesus] has done everything well,' they said." The second is from Colossians 3:23-24: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." While excellence is often reward enough, an extra bonus from God doesn't hurt.

What is your attitude toward excellence? Do you pursue it? Is it a lifestyle of an occasional occurrence? When you function in purpose and pursue goals, excellence is not easily attained yet ultimately unavoidable. People cannot help but say "Wow!" when they experience from you what I experienced with my shirts in Nordstrom.

So there you have it. I hope my effort to write something new is in line with the excellence theme. If it isn't, then feel free to write me with your own example of real-life excellence. You can post it on the site where this entry is posted. In the meantime, I hope you have an excellence-filled week!

Monday Memo 300: Flavored Water

I didn't send a Memo last week. I had some technical problems that weren't sorted out until Wednesday, so I thought a Monday Memo on Thursday just didn't sound right. You have before your eyes issue 300 of the Monday Memo. I started writing in March, 2001 and here it is today, more than six years and 300 issues later. It's been a great experience. Why not take a moment to write a story of how the Memo has impacted you and posting it for others to read on the site where the Memos are posted.

Last week I was in Johannesburg and I was recognized by someone on three separate occasions – twice in the hotel lobby where I was staying and once in the Sandton Mall. Earlier today I was buying lunch at a crowded Nairobi eatery and someone came up and introduced herself to me because she recognized me. Why am I writing this? It is because I love when that happens to me! To learn why this is important, you have to read on.

THE CROWDS WILL CHEER

In some of my seminars, I play the theme song from the Disney movie Hercules. Michael Bolton sings the song and the title is Go The Distance. Here is the verse that, when I hear it, makes me smile.

I have often dreamed of a far-off place,
where a hero's welcome will be waiting for me.
And the crowds will cheer when they see my face.
It may take a lifetime but somehow I'll see it through.

I enjoy being recognized in public. I like posing for pictures and signing autographs. Is that egotistical or vain? It could be, but in my case I think not. It's just part of who I am and I am learning not to oppose who I am. A few years ago, I was in Santiago, Cuba and a man approached me in the airport and asked, "Aren't you John Stanko?" I jokingly responded, "Yes, I am. And I'm glad someone finally recognizes it!" He said he had seen me teach in Los Angeles a few years before and proceeded to tell me what I had taught. He still remembered.

Too often I've tried to distance myself from my work. I wanted it to be "the Lord" or my gift. I didn't want it to be me, whatever that means. When I function in my purpose, however, it's me. My personality, quirks, attitudes, strengths and experiences all contribute to make me effective doing what it is that I do.

RIVERS OF LIVING WATER

You are probably familiar with John 7:38:

Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.

I think there is a flow that is to come out of you and the water from that flow should taste like you. It can't be bitter with anger or unforgiveness, and it can't be salty with lies and deception. And it should not be artificially flavored to taste like someone else's water. Other than that, the water should taste like you. Your flow should have your distinct characteristics as you carry out God's work and you should not apologize for this.

My writing, speaking and consulting has my "flavor," and it flows. How about you? Are you damming up the flow, trying not to be who you are? Or are you filtering the water for impurities and then letting it gush from your life? What's more, the water that flows is not for your benefit; it's for others to drink. So in this case, it's alright for people to drink your flavored water.

Is there anything you enjoy doing or being that you are trying to curtail or even adjust? Well, maybe it's part of your flow and you should stop interfering. Perhaps that characteristic is something God built into you. When you oppose it, you are actually opposing God, telling Him He made a mistake when He put that in you.

So I will continue to smile and shake hands as I go, not worrying about why I enjoy it as much as I do. I just want to be who God made me to be and if anyone has a problem with that, that is their problem and not mine. Have a great week!