

FIRE PIT

Take the log out

Chop

Burn

Fire of life

Guide with light

Comfort with heat

In the pit of solitude

The above “poem” came to me while reading the spiritual classic, *Dark Night of the Soul*, by Saint John of the Cross. Sitting in the rocking chair my wife purchased when pregnant with our first child, I stared at the open book. At some point I was no longer reading. Instead, the words of “Fire Pit” ushered me into a place deep within my spirit—a room where a birthing, or, perhaps more accurately, a death to self was about to take place. Let me explain.

Take the log out

I sat in silence with outstretched ears, listening to this Sermon-on-the-Mount instruction. “What log, Lord?” Is it pride? Lust? Envy? My peripheral vision sees these sins in others. But my pharisaic eyes often ignore them in the mirror. Is this causing the spiritual logjam?

The initial self-examination produced no satisfactory diagnosis. The usual suspects seemed innocent this time. So I waited. Then, after futile guessing, I heard a divine whisper. “Anger.”

“What? What do you mean, anger?” I contested. Surely, outbursts of anger are not my blinding sin, the fruit of my flesh. Do I, like a senior pastor I know, slam my fist on the conference table and berate insubordinates? No. Do I, like a ministry director I know, send emails with sharp, cutting words to make my point heard? No. I have the reputation of being relaxed and in control, even passive. I’m the pastor who can “stop, look, listen.” How could anger be my fault?

Chop

“Chop the log into smaller pieces.”

“Why?”

“So you can see.”

Like splitting a log and counting the rings, my contemplative examination exposed many years of anger. My history with anger runs long. Look at all those rings! An outer ring showed my recent flirtation with road rage. I slow down to irritate tailgaters and then speed up to teach them a further lesson. And what about sports rage? I’m sure a thick ring formed as I threw tennis rackets in frustration—like the time when my racket sailed over the courtside bench, over my dad’s head as he watched my match, and landed in the next court where a teammate was competing. A few anger-enhanced spankings to

train up my children made another ring. My sarcastic humor, stealth gossip, nagging remarks, and those arguments that remain in my head (the kind I always win) kept the log growing. My impatience toward imperfections and my growing list of pet peeves (e.g., finishing my sentences and habitual lateness, just to name a few) continually enlarged the circumference of my log.

Burn

“Burn the log.”

“What?”

“You cannot keep it and live.”

The pieces of the log writhed as if alive. I needed to admit that my “righteous anger” was not all that righteous and will that it be destroyed. I needed to believe that Jesus may have the character to “Be angry, and yet do not sin,” but I certainly do not.

How many times have I held onto anger? What is the allure of this deadly sin? Why am I quick to nitpick and slow to keep my displeasure to myself?

I think for me to “not let the sun go down on [my] anger” (Ephesians 4:26), I would need to live in northern Alaska where the sun does not set! In my case, something has to be done. Anger management? No—more like anger cremation. God wants this sin destroyed. But how?

Confess and repent. I don’t shrug my shoulders and say, “It’s no big deal. It’s not like God will send me to hell for it.” Nor do I deceive myself into believing that I never miss the mark, that I never cross the line. God requires that I acknowledge and abhor my bent toward anger, that I forsake the log. No more excuses. No more justification. No more hiding behind my theological “I’m not perfect, just forgiven” platitude. I release it into the fires of heaven, reducing it to mere ashes.

Fire of life

“Live.”

I sigh. “How?”

“You have seen the power of surrender.”

The memory is there. Several years ago, I witnessed the power of confession and repentance while in the Ivory Coast, West Africa. A middle-aged man, who had trusted in fetishes his whole life, stepped forward in a church that my in-laws planted. He shared in front of three hundred fellow villagers his faith and trust in Jesus Christ. With the pastor by his side, he removed objects one by one from a cardboard box. He displayed each fetish for all to see, confessing the devotion and reverence he offered to them. *Chop!* One group of sticks tied together with twine was believed to bring health. Some animal hair rolled up into a ball was his hope for protection upon his crops.

At the conclusion of the service, the new convert’s fetishes were burned in a big public bonfire, just like in the early church when “those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all” (Acts 19:19). *Burn!* Talk about firing up one’s confession! This man was set free. I have been set free. It is time to celebrate. I too want to sing and dance around the *fire of life*.

Guide with light

“Show them.”

“Who? What?”

“Your neighbors. The Truth.”

I realized what freedom meant then. I was free to take up my call of pastor once again because I had heard the Word and its truth: “First take the log out of your own eye, and *then* you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5). Like a doctor performing delicate eye surgery, I, a physician of the soul, need light to successfully operate on people’s character. Would you stay on the table if your ophthalmologist leaned over you with a scalpel in his hand and a #2 pencil lodged in his eye? Neither will my wife or child or congregant or co-worker if I confront them with anger in my heart. They know the result: pain and suffering for all involved, and even more.

I need God-given clarity and guidance—imputed light—on my own spiritual pilgrimage and as I help others on theirs. Self-examination and humble confession position me to be aware of and pay attention to God’s work in my life. I notice that He is at work giving me faith to believe that nothing I do can be better done with anger. Through this transformation He receives glory and His people receive care.

Comfort with heat

“Forgiven.”

I hear the word and want to sing. For that word is a warm comfort rising from the consumed log of my anger.

Into your hands, Lord Jesus, I commend the wrongs done to me. As I move further up and further in to God’s immediately available kingdom here on earth, I can let Jesus be angry for me. He can handle it. “He who is without sin” can cast the first and all subsequent stones. I delegate vengeance to Him.

The process of removing, chopping, and burning logs takes great effort and grace—and produces treasured results. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, our hearts are renewed and we become more of whom God is really calling us to be. We’re more ready to thank God for His past grace and trust God for His future grace. We welcome the vision of a *better* life—a life where *both* the spirit and the flesh are willing and able to live without sinful anger.

In the pit of solitude

“Alone.”

“Yes, but not lonely.”

God does His work when I am surrounded by Him. Alone in His presence, He updates me on my depravity and His holiness. He opens my eyes and exposes reality. And how does this “was-blind-but-now-I-see” feel? Initially, I feel naked and ashamed. There is nowhere to hide. I feel like God withholds light and comfort.

So I wait. Then in silence we connect. God whispers, “Take the log out.” I respond, “They will be done.” Deep within me there grows the desire to sever old ties with

anger. But who will do this work? Do I remove the log, chop it up, and burn it? Can I? Does God cooperate with my effort? Or does He work alone? Will the work ever be complete? Does the fire of life in me guide and comfort others? I believe I need to sit back down in the rocking chair and think about this for a while. I invite you to do the same in your own pit of solitude.