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Get Your Gills On

Do you ever find yourself in the morning sometimes getting into such a rhythm that you don't really even have to think. In fact most of us could probably do it in our sleep... some of probably do. You know the routine. Get up, get out of bed, walk to the bathroom, brush your teeth, shower, eat. We have done these things so many times it has become natural, we do them instinctively. It's like breathing... most of us are blessed with an excellent respiratory system, we don't even think about it. We don't think about walking or pumping our heart...both the good and bad habits we take for granted... it's instinctive. Well, sometimes when we are in our rhythm of the morning, something or someone comes along to remind us that we are operating in the instinctive zone. We moved into our new home this weekend and after a long night of unpacking and working, morning came and I still felt in a daze. I stumbled into the bathroom not bothering to turn on the lights, not bothering to find my glasses. Looking for the toothpaste. Yes, even something as simple as toothpaste can make you realize the things you do instinctively. Even toothpaste can shock you out of a daze.

It is true we do things instinctively. These can be bad habits, those annoying things that bother our spouse, our brother or sisters, our roommates. But there are instinctive things we do that are good things. Developing good habits is a very good thing. When we have developed a good habit we will instinctively do that habit without even having to think. Just like the fish know how to breath, even when they are 20 feet under water those gills are going in and out... instinctive breathing. Now when I'm under water, my breathing is very calculated and controlled. If I have some scuba gear or snorkel gear on, I am very aware of my breathing... but not the fish. They love to breath under water.

This morning I want us to begin to grow some gills. Not fish gills so we can swim under water...but prayer gills so we can survive under tough times. If your desire is to be a Godly leader...you must pray to survive. Yet, what happens to most of us? We wait until we get into a pinch, then we become more motivated to pray? Most of us do. Why do we find ourselves praying more when the heat is turned up, when life has pinched our fingers in the door and you don't know how to get unstuck? Do you find

yourself praying only as a last resort, when all the things you have tried to do have failed?

I sure tend to be prayer reactor rather than a prayer responder. When the heat of tough times is turned up the prayer is turned up. When the boss says we need this machine up and running today, your manager wants the project complete yesterday. When it's one o'clock Friday night and your daughter is still not home. When someone you love is terminally ill. When the bank sends the fifth bounced check that week. When you are not sure where your third quarter tax payment is coming from and it's almost November. When you are confronted by people so messed up with conflicts and no resolution in sight.

Our natural response is first to try and fix it by ourselves. We want to try and make life work by ourselves. If we have never exercised our prayer gills waiting only until crisis, then we are going to end up swallowing a lot of water. Crisis tends to drive the Godly ones to prayer. But, how can we move from being a last resort pray-er to a quick response pray-er? How can we get to the point where we instinctively pray as the first response to crisis. How can we get away from the thinking that demands that we give ourselves a shot at figuring it out before we give it to God? My purpose today is to encourage us to become instinctive pray-ers when the problems put us under water. Not last-resort, let's-talk-about-it, let's-try-to-figure-a-way-out then pray about it pray-ers, but quick-response pray-ers. Do it now pray-ers. Not forced to pray folks but faithful to pray people. A faith that is instinctively drawn to prayer. When people ask us to pray, we stop and pray instead of saying "sure I'll pray about that" but then forget during the week. I know I've been guilty of that. It's not that you didn't want to pray or didn't mean to... we just forgot! We need to begin to pray just like Jesus did. It seems everywhere he went Jesus was praying. It was instinctive just like breathing. How can we begin to pray as natural as we breathe? When your life is underwater, how can we begin to develop prayer gills. Gills that allow us to breathe when we're under water, drowned by circumstance and conflict? How can we get some prayer gills?

To get to the point where we are praying instinctively even under water, we need some gills. Nehemiah was an incredible leader. He was savvy. He planned well. He organized people. He was a team minded coach. He anticipated potential difficulties. He built ownership into his projects. He was an expert at handling criticism. He had endurance and bulldog tenacity in the face of many attempts to divert his energy and focus. Nehemiah was a cheer leader. A servant leader. An incredible study on leadership can be found by studying the life of Nehemiah. But, there was one thing that made that

all possible. One thing that set him apart from all the rest that had the techniques and style.

Nehemiah had a large lung capacity and an amazing ability to prayer breath under difficulty. He had a large set of prayer gills. He had spent hours and hours practicing to use his prayer gills. He got so good at praying that he could even pray while being drowned under tough times. Remember Nehemiah... This was not just another professional... he was a guy who had heart. He cared and loved the people and saw the great need. In the first few verses in Chapter one of Nehemiah, he had a very defining moment. A moment when he was overwhelmed by a need that he knew God wanted him to meet. He wept over the misery and distress that the people of God in Jerusalem were experiencing because their city and walls lay in ruin. He had a God sensitive heart that cried about the things that God cried about. When he was presented with a need he felt the pain of that need and then responded to that need. Turn with me to Nehemiah 1:5 to see how he instinctively responded to need. (READ Neh. 1:5-11)

This guy had some kind of prayer gills didn't he. Isn't it amazing to see someone in a high profile position responding to need in prayer immediately as a first response. Prayer for Nehemiah was just as natural as breathing. The problem comes and Nehemiah is on his knees. The conflict surfaces and bamm! his knees instinctively hit the ground. Nehemiah could even breathe under the waters of crisis, he had developed prayer gills. Lets take a look at some of those gills...maybe some of us will be able to grow a few of these. You want to begin to pray more instinctively instead of feeling labored and forced? Here are some of the gills that Nehemiah had grown.

The first prayer gill we see in this passage is Nehemiahs view of God. Nehemiah had a "come through God." Just knowing some things about God and affirming God's greatness helped Nehemiah breathe under waters of conflict. His God could do it! Our first response to problems and conflict is trying to figure out how we can get it solved, who is to blame, who's responsible. Not Nehemiah, look at verse 5. It says "Nehemiah fasted and prayed. Fasting is the giving up of food, the time for preparing eating and clean up to devote to prayer. It is not a rabbits foot that you rub to cajole God into doing your bidding, it is an affirmation of your inability and His total ability. Prayer and fasting is saying, I must depend on you I can't handle this one on my own. I must depend on my "come thru God", an awesome and great God. By praying he believed that prayer made a difference. Nehemiah lists some of the things about God that he was banking on. He exclaims His sovereignty over all "...God of heaven.." His amazing ability to perform, "Great and awesome God... and he affirms the promise keeping nature of God, "Remember God,, remember your loyal covenant keeping love. hesed. lovingkindness"

Through these verses Nehemiah continues to remind himself and the readers that he is the servant and God is the one who comes through. If the “come through God” and Nehemiah could pull off the impossible and get this project complete, there is no doubt who will get the praise. You get the idea that Nehemiah just wants to be in the stadium when God begins to work, Nehemiah doesn’t even need a seat on the 50 yard line. Nehemiah instinctively calls upon his come thru God and is looking for things to happen. Nehemiah has a great big prayer gill growing on his side, it’s his big view of what God can do. When he looks at God he sees a “come thru God” The first gill to develop instinctive prayer, grow a big gill that sees a “come thru God.”

The second gill that Nehemiah was able to grow was the humility of confession. He had grown a prayer gill of confession watered by a large helping of humility. He admitted to God his part of the problem, his shortcoming in the conflict. This second gill I see is the willingness of Nehemiah to take responsibility. The gill says, “I’ll confess my mess.” In verse 6 he confesses the sins of his people yet includes himself as part of the the problem. He admits responsibility for a part of the sin. A good case for both corporate and individual repentance could be made here. “We have acted corruptly.” against you and your laws. What is amazing to me is how he avoid the comparison trap. Why God, I am trying to be righteous and holy, in fact I’m much more holy and law keeping then most of the rest of these people here in exile. I sure wish they would confess, repent and turn to you! He could have gotten into the victim thinking. It wasn’t my messing up that got me here in exile. I wasn’t the one that blew it back in Judah so bad that God had to discipline us and send us here. I am a victim of my environment. I will be the first to agree that growing up in an abusive home situation, a difficult upbringing, a materially or emotionally deprived household has a great effect on relationships, emotional stability, bents and ingrained models of response. There are issues from ones past that must be exposed and dealt with, confession and forgiveness play a huge part in that. In most cases there are perpetrators and victims.. yet this is not what Nehemiah talked about. He did not see himself as a victim. He refused to wallow in victim land. He confessed his part of the mess and moved on to a solution. From Lorena Bobbitt to the Menendez brothers to the Reginald Denny case, we are hearing more and more a message that says, “I am not responsible for my actions because the environment I was in caused me to do this action” One cannot jail the environment so... I am a victim. When we are in a conflict we tend to blame. We can see the other persons stubbornness and unwillingness to change.. but not in us. Husbands and wife conflicts. I can’t change her...but here is the part where I’ve blown it. I can’t change him but I have messed this up. Nehemiah couldn’t confess individual sins for other people but he could

confess his part of the mess. He confessed and moved on. Nehemiah didn't dwell on it. He wanted to be a part of the solution not the problem. He confessed his part of the mess to God. Note he directed it to God. He saw sin correctly as against God. Ps 51:4 says, "Against thee and thee only have I sinned" Nehemiah had developed some gills for underwater praying. He had a big view of a "come thru God" and was humble enough to "confess his mess." He admitted his part of the problem before God.

The third gill I see that Nehemiah has developed was his bold claims on God's promises. This is the bold claim prayer gill. In verse 8 he starts quoting scripture back to God. He reminds God of the promise that He made to the children of Israel just before they entered the promised land. God promised that if the people were unfaithful then He would scatter them, but if they repented and returned to God then He would gather them back to the land that He had promised to them. The first part of that promise had been fulfilled, but not the second part. They had been exiled due to their unfaithfulness to God, but the gathering back had not happened totally. Nehemiah says to God, "You are a God who keeps your promise." Please keep your promise God. He was concerned about the reputation of God. He boldly reminds God of His promises. God has promised us that he will never leave us. We need to develop prayer gills like Nehemiah that remind God of His promises, prayer in line with His purposes. We can pray to God "You have promised that you will never leave us, but I am feeling lonely. Please God I need a friend to recognize your presence with me. I need to see you through a friend. God may not choose to use a friend to fulfill your loneliness but we are in Bible land when we ask for a friend. We can pray, "God you have promised to give peace to your children." God I'm not feeling that peace...please remember your promise and change either me or my circumstances so I will experience the peace you promised. Pray with the purposes of God in mind and repeat them to him. When I pray about the building I often say, "God I know you want to reach more kids for Christ, I know you want more people to become more mature believers, and God this building would be a great tool to help us accomplish what you want done... now you may choose to use another church another tool but we would sure like to see part of the action. And God we are going to praise your name when it happens because we will know its from you... and God...the people who live in this town will be amazed how how we were able to build this and we can witness to the fact that you were working and you wanted this building to reach more kids for Christ. Like Nehemiah we need to boldly claim God's promises. We need to pray not with our own purposes in mind, but God's promises and purposes in mind

The final prayer gill I see in the life of Nehemiah is a encouraging gill. Look at verse 11. Nehemiah is encouraging others to pray. I don't think was content to be quiet

about the concerns of his heart. He was praying with others. “be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant and the prayer of Thy servants” He is modeling prayer and encouraging others to join him.

Nehemiah was a great man who prayed. In fact if you look down through the history of Christianity there were many great men and women. Some were rich, some poor, some learned and some uneducated, some loud and ranting and some quiet soft spoken. But when one looks at the common denominator of their lives one always finds.. prayer. A serious leader must be a serious prayer. Hypocrites don't pray in secret... what does your prayer life look like? Has that good habit not yet been developed? Have you been waiting for something to shock you out of a prayerless life routine. Yesterday morning I reached for the toothpaste. The Crest toothpaste that is always there. It's something I could always count on. Erin, carries that extra tube in her travel bag. Remember it was dark and I was groggy. I grabbed what looked like the back of a Crest tube. I squeezed out some white paste on brush, ran a little water on it and began brushing. You all know what happened. Do you know how similar the back of Crest toothpaste and Dessatin look like. Yuck...Time for a new tooth brush. Maybe it's time for something new and fresh in your life. Maybe it's time to begin growing some prayer gills. Wouldn't it be great to be such a well practiced pray-er that you could pray even under the water of tough times. Begin this week by praying immediately when any one asks you for prayer. Somethings comes up that is prayer worthy..."Do you have a minute lets pray about it" Shall we try that this week? Lets go out there and get our gills on."