

BROKENNESS: DOORWAY TO SPIRITUAL POWER
by Eddy Hall

On August 3, 1981, two families who had just left Ohio a thousand miles behind joined our family in Oklahoma City to help launch a ministry to the poor. That day marked the beginning of the fulfillment of a God-given dream that for nine years, since the vision had first begun to take shape, had been the passion of my life.

During our first year together, the three families bought homes in the multi-ethnic neighborhood we had chosen for our ministry, all within two blocks of each other. By our second year, two more families had joined us. Several small ministry programs were up and running, and our ministry was providing two staff members for a neighborhood shelter for homeless families.

As the administrator for Community of the Servant, I loved getting to know neighborhood people and responding to their needs. I loved planning ministry with other community members and trying to build community. I loved speaking in churches, describing our work, challenging people to a more active concern for the poor.

I lived through those days intensely grateful for the privilege of doing such deeply satisfying work. After nine years of waiting, I was finally fulfilling the calling for which God had prepared me.

But from time to time my joy was tempered by a nagging problem. I knew that for the ministry to be all God wanted it to be, God had to be in control, guiding our decisions, providing the power to change people's lives. And I knew that for God to consistently guide me, I needed to take time regularly to seek God's guidance. So I decided to set aside time each morning to be alone with God to present my own needs and those of community members and neighborhood people and to seek guidance for my day's activities. At least that was my plan.

Occasionally I actually pulled it off, but more often I plunged into the work I loved with little more than a perfunctory nod in God's direction. What needed to be done seemed so clear and so urgent that I felt little need to consult God first. I said I needed God's direction, but my actions revealed that I felt I could run the ministry by my own wits, energy, and willpower.

This gap between belief and action bothered me, so I began asking God to free me of my illusion that I was capable of directing the ministry myself, to help me *feel* as powerless to make the ministry succeed on my own as I believed I was. For almost two years I prayed that prayer, yet saw no answer.

The death of a dream

Then on October 19, 1983, Kim and Becky, one of the original couples in the community and both on ministry staff, came into my office and announced, "We're leaving the Community of the Servant." Two weeks later another couple left. A third family

became inactive. The Community of the Servant was dead.

I had given the ministry my best. It had looked to me--and to the churches and individuals backing us--like the ministry was making impressive progress. But now I faced the question: *What do you do when 100 percent is not enough, when you have given everything and your life's calling lies in shambles at your feet?*

As I considered that question, the pain of failure opened me to God's Spirit. I saw how specific mistakes I had made had contributed to the ministry's collapse: failing to clearly articulate the original vision, insensitivity in decision-making, spending my time administering programs rather than initiating pastoral care to neighborhood people as God had called me to do.

But the underlying reason for the ministry's failure, God showed me, was that I had too often relied on my own strength. Through the ministry's death, God had answered my prayer. This confidence-shattering failure had left me broken, accomplishing what two years of good intentions had not: for the first time I *felt* powerless to minister.

Moses, broken man

In my search for what to do next, I turned to the story of Moses. Years before Moses had inspired me as an example of relocation--identifying with and living among those you seek to serve. He had given up the educational opportunity, political privilege, and the wealth of Pharaoh's court, choosing instead to suffer with his people (see Hebrews 11:24-26). In my decision to relocate to the inner city to minister, I had identified with Moses.

Moses had watched his people suffer, longing for the day when he could strike a blow for justice. When he saw an Egyptian cruelly beat a Hebrew, Moses saw an opportunity. He killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. That night Moses must have looked back over the day's events satisfied. He had taken his first small step toward liberating his people. Perhaps the next day he would take his second.

The next day he saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked one of them, "Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?"

The man said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you did the Egyptian?" (Ex. 2:13-14*).

His crime discovered, Moses fled Egypt for his life. In the forty years that followed, the question must have returned to haunt Moses a thousand times: "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" Little could Moses' questioner have dreamed what a world-shattering question that was for Moses. Had he only been imagining all these years that God had a special mission for him?

His miraculous protection at birth, his opportunity for education, his strong desire to help his people--surely these meant *something*. What had gone wrong? Moses' Hebrew brother gave voice to Moses' profoundest self-doubt, and to his question Moses had no answer.

Every day for the next forty years Moses would live with the question: *What do you do when you have given all to fulfill a mission, when you have spared nothing--and still you fail? What*

do you do when 100 percent is not enough?

While watching sheep, Moses likely spent thousands of hours agonizing over his brothers and sisters enslaved in Egypt, but whenever he tried to translate his concern into a plan of action, he always wound up at the same place: he was powerless to do anything about it. So shattered was Moses' self-confidence that he may have despaired of ever being used by God. The lesson God wanted to burn into Moses' soul was unavoidable: *Moses was not equal to the task.*

I identified with Moses' failure and the brokenness it produced. But God wasn't through with Moses, and in that I found hope.

Moses, Spirit-empowered man

Out of a burning bush, God spoke: "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Ex. 3:10-11).

This was not the Moses of forty years earlier. His earlier eagerness had turned to reluctance. Moses had learned, not just in his head, but deep in his soul, that he was inadequate to the task God was calling him to do. So Moses said, "God, I can't do it. I'm not adequate."

God's response was, "You're right, Moses. In fact, the reason I can trust you with this assignment is because you know you can't do it. You're not adequate--but I AM."

At the burning bush God began to teach Moses that God's power can work most fully through those who are most convinced of their own powerlessness. God was able to bring deliverance through Moses only because Moses was absolutely certain he alone could not save his people.

Moses accepted God's call and went on to confront Pharaoh, free his people from bondage, and lead them through the Red Sea and into forty years of miraculous sustenance in the wilderness.

The mission Moses had tried and failed to accomplish in his own strength, he fulfilled by God's power.

Resurrection of the dream

As I prayed for guidance, I felt that God was giving me a similar call to start again. Because of the people we had lost, success now seemed far less likely. But I felt God was promising that the ministry would be rebuilt "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zech. 4:6).

In the years that followed, God resurrected the community. New people joined. Peace replaced the former discord, and those of us who had come through the community's painful collapse enjoyed a time of healing. The focus of my ministry, in keeping with my call, changed from administration to pastoral care. It seemed to me that God was using me to touch people's needs more than ever before. And when the time did come for our community to disband, it was not because of broken relationships. In fact, relationships were at their all-time best. It was because God was calling those in leadership to move on.

Why the difference? Where before I had struggled

unsuccessfully to discipline myself to seek God's guidance, during those post-resurrection years I felt such a deep need for God's daily intervention that it was easy to start most days with time alone with God. I had learned, not just in my head, but deep in my soul, that without God's daily guidance and power, I would fail.

A choice

I never would have asked for brokenness, but when it came I thanked God for it. Through it my prayer that I would feel deeply my need to rely daily not on my own strength but on God was answered.

But brokenness alone doesn't guarantee Spirit-empowered living and ministry. It simply offers the opportunity. It's the open doorway. To enter that doorway requires a choice.

Brokenness--the destruction of confidence in self-sufficiency--leaves us with two options. The first option is despair. We can quit hoping, give up on life, either by committing actual suicide or becoming one of the living dead.

The second option is dependence, falling into the hands of a waiting God. Paul knew what it was to find himself unequal to life's demands: "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure. . . . Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death." But Paul saw God at work in his suffering: "This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8-9). Not equal to the demands confronting him, Paul faced a choice: despair or dependence. Out of his brokenness, Paul chose--and learned--dependence.

To become dependable channels of God's power requires deeply learning two spiritual realities. The first is our own powerlessness: "By myself I can do nothing" (John 5:30). The second is God's power: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13). When we embrace our own powerlessness and throw ourselves in dependence on God's power, only then can we experience for ourselves the great paradox Paul discovered: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

--THE END--

All Scripture quotations from NIV.