

Father's Day Message

Jim Stevens

The Woodside Church

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Good morning and Happy Father's Day! My name is Jim Stevens, also known by some of you as Darlene's husband.

I am a glossophobe! Don't worry, it's not contagious. But it is common. 73% of the population is afflicted with glossophobia. What is it? The fear of public speaking. In late March I jokingly said to Darlene if I ever give the Father's Day message, this is the year because I would not have to give it in person. About three weeks later Pastor Doug called and said "I know you are not a fan of public speaking Jim but would you consider giving the Father's Day message this year?" Immediately I thought to myself BUSTED!!!

Well, I am here to tell you not only was I BUSTED but for most of my life I was BLOCKED! It began when I was 13. On the morning of April 24th 1961, I kissed my mother goodbye and headed off to school. Some hours later, I was called to the school office and sent home. Confused by what this all meant, my father sat me down and told me that my mother suffered a heart attack that morning and died. I was immediately in a state of shock and disbelief. That evening my dad came to my room. Sitting on my bed we both wept uncontrollably. Never had I seen my dad cry. Wiping the tears away he quickly asked me to keep it between the two of us. He was uncomfortable expressing his emotions. So I learned to "keep a stiff upper lip" and bury my feelings just like my dad.

That is where my blockage began. The obstruction was not just in me. From that day forward a barrier rose between God and me. I asked God why he took my mother away from me. I felt robbed of someone I dearly loved and angry with God. I remained blocked for many years. Even though I was raised in a Christian home, as I went through high school and college with that block firmly in place, my faith continued to fade.

I graduated from college, married Darlene and God blessed us with three wonderful children: Jamie, Becky and Dan. Like many men, I was trained and taught to find my worth in my career. I entered the insurance industry determined to do my best, reach my goals and fulfill my dreams. I worked hard at my job and rose through the ranks at a comfortable pace. Despite my success, I sensed a gnawing feeling something was not right. I value honesty and integrity yet anyone who swims in the cut throat, back stabbing shark tank of Corporate America will tell you there is a lot of pressure to ignore these essential principles. I stuck to my values and still was elevated to a senior officer position at my firm. I earned a positive reputation throughout my industry and an office in one of the tallest buildings in the world. You could say I was on top of the world. And I was.....my office was on the 53rd floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center.

Normally I would be at my desk by 8:30 am. Yet on that crystal clear Tuesday, September 11th I was at home packing for a business trip. Jamie's wife Lori called me and said an airplane struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center. I turned on the TV and continued to pack and listen to the initial reports of a small plane striking the tower. At 9:03 am the South Tower was struck and chaos ensued. I spoke with Darlene and called my children to let them know I was okay. My brother Woodie called to tell me that the airports were closed and to stay home where I was safe.

I spent the day watching TV as the buildings burned and collapsed. Watching the scary images over and over on the TV. The phone rang continually all day...friends calling friends. Do you know where he is? Was she in the building? Yes, I am safe at home. Have you heard from him? Panic, fear and tears all day! I lost friends and former colleagues on that day. I still see their faces and feel their absence. That night my family gathered around me and for the first time since my mother's death, I cried uncontrollably. My son Dan said he'd never seen me cry. I was stunned to discover I was just like my father: unable to let out my feelings.

I didn't want to live this way anymore. So many blockages filled my heart: the tragic loss of my mother and my coworkers as well as the guilt that I survived and they did not. How can I get past the barriers? How can I find peace?

The breakthrough began when a friend told me about Comfort Zone Camp-a weekend getaway for grieving children. That spring they set up a camp in New Jersey specifically for children who lost loved ones on 9/11. She encouraged me to be a "big buddy." Since I lost my mother at a young age, I felt I could mentor a child through his or her grief. We spent 2 ½ days with our "little buddies" in healing circles and team building activities designed to help express their grief. I remember one 7 year old girl who lost her father. She was terribly shy and withdrawn all weekend. She sat quietly and did not speak during any of our activities. At the memorial service on the last day, however, she surprised us when she stood before the entire group and sang with all her heart, "You are My Sunshine." It was a song she always sang with her dad at bedtime. It brought us all to tears! Why was it so hard for me to express my grief as this little girl did?

God worked through these children to crack open my blockage. It was okay to feel the pain and to let my sorrow flow. If they can cry and grieve so can I. Through these little ones, God was healing my wounds. During my three years at Comfort Zone Camp the blockage started to break up as God's living water trickled through. Yet God was not satisfied with a breakthrough. He wanted me to build my relationship with Jesus Christ. I attended worship every Sunday, participated in a Growth Group, served as an Elder and Deacon. All this prepared me to find God's purpose for my life.

In January 2010, a massive earthquake shattered the nation of Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Death and destruction filled the country from end to end. Later that year Bob Broeze announced a Woodside mission trip to Haiti. I was so moved by Bob's presentation I turned to my daughter Becky and said "I think I am going to Haiti." Becky said "you aren't going to Haiti dad." Again I said "I think I am going to Haiti." Feeling the powerful call of the Holy Spirit, I traveled with the Woodside team to Haiti in February 2011. During the first trip I had a literal "mountaintop" experience that profoundly changed my life.

Our mission team hiked to the mountaintop village of Balizaj to give out water purification tablets. In one of the huts, an old and frail woman thanked me with a strong and grateful hug. When she finally let go I looked into her eyes and saw the face of Jesus. In that moment the dam broke. Jesus cleared the last remnants of my blockage. I have not been the same since.

Jesus says, "Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.'" (John 7:37-38 NLT). All those years from my mother's death, through the cut-throat world of

Corporate America and the collapse of the World Trade Center, I never knew how thirsty I was. Finally Jesus satisfied my thirst and revealed my purpose in life: to serve as a river of Jesus' Living Water so it may quench thirsty souls. Isn't it ironic? While I was giving out water tablets to make her water clean, Jesus cleaned out my blockage with rivers of his living water. And here is the twist I didn't expect: Jesus is turning my emotional blockages into building blocks for His Kingdom.

In 2016 I was asked to read a bible passage on September 11th at the Garden of Reflection Memorial Service. I stopped by Pastor Doug's office to get his thoughts on an appropriate passage to read. Doug said "why don't you tell your story Jim?" I said "I was asked to read a bible passage Doug." Again he said "why don't you tell your story?" Oh no, public speaking.....HELP!

Well after putting my 9/11 story together, practicing in front of Darlene and the mirror and praying profusely, I told my story...twice - at the evening vigil on the 10th and again at the memorial service in the morning of the 11th. The Holy Spirit was with me all the way filling me with peace. He used my blockage of grief to give others hope.

I now know my true value and identity are not determined by Corporate America. I am truly valued because I am a child of God. What's important is not how others see me but how God sees me. On that mountaintop God put in my heart a passion to serve others. I have participated in 8 mission trips to Haiti. In 2011 our team dug the foundation for a vocational school by hand with pick axe and shovel. For several years we worked together with our Haitian brothers and sisters building this school known as Men Nan Men (Hand in Hand). To date, 5,000 students have studied there learning English, Spanish, computers, cooking, electrical and sewing skills. Our team has distributed food, visited orphanages and delivered musical instruments to local students. Working and worshiping together with our friends and helping those in dire need of basic things like food, clean water, housing, clothing and education.

I love serving meals at the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen. I've made true friendships with the folks at TASK. I also look forward to providing meals for those in need in Kensington through the Cast Your Cares Ministry. Even the devastating pain of losing my mother is used by God to build others up. In addition to Comfort Zone Camp, I currently help to facilitate Grief Share sessions at Woodside. It's a very rewarding experience to help others work through their grief blockages and receive Jesus' living water.

How about you? Is there a blockage in your heart that is preventing God's Living Water from flowing through you? Let the Holy Spirit remove the blockage and help you discover your purpose. I may still be afraid of public speaking, but I will never stop speaking about the power of Jesus' healing, living water.

Will you pray with me? Heavenly Father, thank you for the opportunity to share my message today. Please be with all who are listening today in need of your help in removing any existing blockages of grief or identity or doubt so that your living water will flow through them and they will discover their purpose. In Jesus holy name we pray. Amen