



## JUMPING HURDLES TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Pastor Al Detter    Various Texts

5:30, 9:30 & 11:00am    Grace Church    September 29 & 30, 2007

We've been in a series called "Going Deeper with God". And the reason? I want you to go deeper with God! I can't think of anything more strategic, vital, or important in life than connecting deeply with the God of the universe.

The 1st week I talked about how you start going deeper with God. We need an initial trip to the cross to deal with the penalty of our sin. God needs to forgive us of all our sins. That makes it possible for us to fellowship with God.

The 2nd week Derek talked about how we need to make many return trips to the cross. Not for salvation but to allow the cross to have a continuing effect on our spiritual growth. The cross is designed to keep working in our lives after our salvation.

Last week Mike talked about how God sent the Holy Spirit to be the divine power to produce fruit in our lives and to help us serve each other with our spiritual gifts. This good relationship with the Holy Spirit allows us to go deeper with God.

Today I want to talk about some things that hinder us from going deeper with God. As the hymn writer said, "Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God? (Am I a Soldier of the Cross? by Isaac Watts)". Going deeper with God is not easy or automatic. It's a very difficult struggle.

I remember going off to Bible college to study for the ministry. I was taken by the amazing campus of the Moody Bible Institute in the heart of Chicago. I was from a small rural town in Pennsylvania. Classes started and I sat under some amazing men and women of God. The desire to go deep with God was ignited. We had special conferences and speakers throughout the year. It was like heaven on earth. I remember standing on the old iron staircase outside the dorm one night just crying out to God to go deeper with Him.

The same thing happened at Dallas Seminary. Talk about an environment that had the power to lead you deeper to God. Talk about incredible professors and chapel speakers! Everything was in place—the mentors, tools, and friends that had a dream to turn the world upside down for God.

There I was in my late teens and early 20's thinking, "By the time I'm the ripe old age of 30, I'll be a man of God too enjoying a deep walk with Him." The thought was so exciting. Somehow I thought that by going to Bible college and seminary and then into ministry, I'd automatically turn into this spiritual giant. Was I wrong! Thirty came and I wasn't nearly the man of God I thought I'd be. Neither was I at 40. Nor at 50. I've got my doubts about 60.

What I found is that to go deep with God, you've got to face resistance. There are things in the way. There's no direct, easy path to go deep with God. You've got to jump some imposing hurdles.

I love to watch track and field events. McDowell has a great team and our own Joe Sanford is a top notch coach. My son Jared participated on the team when he was at McDowell. One of his events was high hurdles.

I used to think, “Who ever thought this up event? Why not just run a sprint with nothing in the way? No obstacles. Just a fast, unobstructed run out of the blocks to the finish line. Why frustrate these athletes?” That’s how I used to feel about the Christian life, too. Get right with God, get close to the Holy Spirit and run a straight shot to maturity. Nothing in the way. Going deep with God should be a breeze. Wrong!

Maybe you’ve had a lot of thoughts as I’ve been talking. Maybe you’re thinking, “Going deeper with God has been easy. I’ve been cruising along and nothing’s been getting in the way.” Good. I don’t think that’s going to last but good for you. Or maybe you’re thinking, “I’ve found it hard to go deep with God too. These obstacles keep getting in the way. It’s a struggle.”

I know many of you. My experience tells me that most of you want to go deeper with God. You have a desire to walk with God and you have a hunger for more intimacy with Him. My experience also tells me that you keep running against things that get in the way of that. You’ve found the spiritual life to be very frustrating at times.

And you might be thinking that the Senior Pastor should have it all together by now. He should be able to leap high over those hurdles with incredible spiritual power. Or, if I struggle with hurdles in my life and I’m the Senior Pastor, what hope is there for you?

Let me tell you something. Titles and positions do nothing to eliminate hurdles in the Christian life. In fact, sometimes they make the hurdles higher. We’re all fellow-strugglers on this road to Christian maturity and a deepening relationship with God. No matter who we are or how long we live, we’re going to face obstacles along the way. I highly recommend that you read the old classic, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan. It’s a book every Christian should read along with the Bible.

In the pathway of going deeper with God, there are hurdles for every Christian. If we’re going to go deep with God, we’re going to have to jump over them. We can’t stop running the race. We can’t stay down if we fall. We must find a way over them.

I came up with a long list of hurdles for this sermon. My hurdles may not be yours and your hurdles may not be mine. Obviously, I can’t deal with a long list of hurdles today. So I want to deal with what I believe are the most significant and common hurdles for all of us. We all face 4 major hurdles on our journey to go deeper with God.

### **Hurdle #1—Me.**

I’m confident that I’m the biggest hurdle in the way of my going deeper with God. More than anything else, I’m the problem. I think that’s true about you too. If it’s not true about you, you need to let me know. I want to find out how you tamed the huge hurdle of self.

We have all these parts in us that oppose our walk with God. I want to give you some illustrations.

**1) The flesh.** This is a common biblical term. We tend to think of flesh as the soft, muscular tissue of the body. In the Bible, the term “flesh” is also used to represent illicit desires and lusts within us that frequently use the body as its tool (Eph. 2:3). The flesh is the activity of the mind that involves the use of the body to do things outside the will of God. The flesh is opposed to the character and ways of God (Gal. 5:17). The activity of the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 8:8). The deeds of the flesh are antithetical to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19-23).

The flesh is a strong force within us. It wants to control us. The flesh is not our new heart that God puts within us as a result of the new birth. The flesh is a spiritual enemy, a traitor. It’s a hurdle we must jump over.

If we don’t deal with the flesh, we commit all kinds of sin with our bodies. Most of the sins of the flesh are sensual in some way. They give the body pleasure for a season. But it does damage in the long run, none the least of which is, if we fulfill the desires of the flesh, we can’t go deep with God.

**2) Pride.** Pride is an attribute we all possess in some form. Pride is the condition of being self-absorbed. The central figure of pride is me. Life is about me more than anything or anyone else. All of us have pride.

Sometimes we think that pride is exaggerating self above others. That's kind of its classic form. But pride is also subtle. We may have feelings of low self-esteem and inferiority and wonder what others are thinking about us. That too is pride because the focus of attention is on us.

Regardless of its form, pride is about taking over the #1 spot in life. It diverts attention from God as the center of our lives to ourselves. God can't have competition for 1st place. When pride gets in the way, we can't go deep with God.

**3) Lack of discipline.** Many of us don't have the discipline we need to go deep with God. For instance, if you don't have a regular time in the Word or in prayer, you can't go deep with God. God speaks to us in the Bible and we speak to Him in prayer. When we don't practice these disciplines on a regular basis, we're out of communication with God. And we all know we can't go deeper in any relationship without ongoing communication. If we're not in the Word and in prayer, we're the problem. We're not leading ourselves well spiritually.

**4) Strife.** One of the hardest things in life is getting along well with others. Many marriages are strained. There are issues between parents and children, church people, coworkers, neighbors. When we get sidewise with people, we tend to think it's the other person's fault. And sometimes it is. But often, the reason there's a problem is that the other person has triggered an immaturity or unresolved hurt or issue in us that needs to be dealt with.

If we can't see that, it affects our love. If we pull our love from someone because of something in us, guess what? The Bible says we can't go deep with God (1 Jn. 4:20). It's amazing how many people claim to love God and can't get along with those around them. It's a deception. You can't go deep with God and hate or resent or hold a grudge or stay angry.

There are so many other areas I could deal with. But this hurdle named "Me" is about self-management—how I, how you, get in the way of going deeper with God. For us to go deeper with God, I've got to jump the ME hurdle. Often. I'm my own worst enemy in going deep with God.

## **Hurdle #2—Satan.**

In America, 34% believe that the devil is a personal being who directs evil beings and influences people to do wrong. 36% believe that the devil is an impersonal force that influences people to do wrong. In the Bible it's 100%. It always teaches that there's an actual, evil personal being who opposes God and leads people towards wrong.

Before this world was created, there was a revolution in Heaven. Lucifer was the preeminent angel who, in a spirit of pride, rebelled against God. He was cast out of Heaven with a huge band of rebellious angels. He became known as Satan, which means "adversary" or "the great opposer". From that point on, Satan has been at war with God and anyone associated with God.

If you're connected with God, Satan opposes you. Not just others. YOU! His agenda is to keep you away from God, to lead you into sin, and to actually harm you in anyway he can. You can see the effects of Satan's work in broken relationships, addictions, diseases, sinful acts, and unhappiness. Hear me. Satan doesn't want you to go deep with God. He stands in the way of any progress you're trying to make with God.

Satan exercises his power through demons, fallen angels. There's an unseen world of evil powers that has a direct effect on human affairs. We tend to think that our problems are caused by others. But Paul says in Ephesians 6:11-12 that we're to stand against the schemes of the devil because our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places.

I believe there are demons that target each one of us to hinder our progress with God. Satan doesn't want anyone to find a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and if they do, his intention is to ruin that relationship. So Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:13-18 that we must suit up in the armor of God. We must do battle against the forces of Satan. If we don't, we'll live in sin and defeat and far from God.

Most of us live our lives so fast that we forget that Satan opposes us and any progress we're trying to make with God. We have to remind ourselves daily that there's a huge hurdle in our way named Satan.

### **Hurdle #3—The World**

The term "world" has several meanings in the Bible. It can mean the universe that God created. It can mean humanity, all the people in the world. It's predominantly used in the New Testament in an ethical sense. It stands for a system of thought and behavior that's under the control of Satan. It enthrones values that displease God and pleases the minds and desires of the flesh. The world replaces God as the supreme object of man's interests and affections. In this sense, the world is a major hurdle to our spiritual progress with God.

All the way through the Bible, we're told that if you want to go deep with God you can't embrace the world. In the Old Testament, Israel was told not to marry foreign wives, people outside their covenant faith. It would lead them from God. And Israel was told not to learn and practice the customs of the unconverted nations around them. But they kept learning the ways of the pagans and intermarrying with them. And it brought the judgment of God on them.

In the New Testament we're told that friendship with the world is hostility toward God, that to love the world is to make us like an adulterous spouse to God (Jas 4:4). In I John 2:15, it says that if we love the world and the things in the world, the love of the Father isn't in us.

It's obvious that we all live in the midst of this world, its culture, its practices, its thinking. Jesus acknowledged that when He said that we are in the world not of the world (Jn. 17). And that's the big distinction. We must learn the difference between being in the world and being of the world. If we realize we're in the world, we'll have a sense that we can't let it stain us and that we have a mission to reach the people of the world who need Jesus. But if we are of the world, we've adopted its lifestyle and thinking. It halts our progress with God. And we lose our sense of purpose and mission.

In my opinion, this hurdle named "World" is what most paralyzes the church in going deeper with God. The church has embraced the world. The message the church needs to hear is to come out of this world, to come out of Babylon, to stop practicing the ways of unregenerate culture. We've been saved from this world, from its thinking, from its customs, from its practices. But the church keeps going back to that from which it was redeemed. The studies are clear. There's barely any difference between how the world lives and how the church lives.

We dress like the world, we spend like the world, we entertain ourselves like the world, we drink like the world, we gamble like the world, we're sensual like the world, we're taken with this world's celebrities. Compare how many movies and how much TV Christians watch with how much prayer and Bible study they do. You can't go deep with God through Hollywood.

When I was a kid, the church I grew up in made us aware of what was "worldly". The only problem, for many it became legalism. And legalism does nothing to get us deeper with God either. Our church, like most other churches, needs a wakeup call about friendship with this world. This world is led by Satan and it's covertly arranged so that we can live a beautiful benign or sinful life without God. If we buy into this world's thinking, values, and ways, we can appear religious, but it's the end of the trail with God. Friends, the world is a huge hurdle that trips up most Christians. It's time to jump over the world hurdle. We need to wean ourselves from the world in order to go deep with God.

## **Hurdle #4—Troubles.**

At some point in the road of life there's going to be this hurdle named "Troubles". As the great black preacher, E. V. Hill used to say, "Troubles come to everyone's door." This was the 1st hurdle presented in the Bible. Job was the 1st book to be written. And what's the problem in the book? Troubles!

Troubles. Trials. Tribulation. Tragedies. Call it what you like. It hurts. It's unsettling. It's scary. It's unwanted. We don't go, "Praise God! Here comes the hurdle named 'Troubles'. I just love problems."

God has a design for troubles. It's to produce Christ-like character in us (Jas. 1:2-4). It's to produce faith without which we can't please God (Heb. 11) . It's to produce dependence on the Lord (Phil. 4:11-13). But Satan also has an agenda. When troubles come, he wants those troubles to keep us from going deeper with God.

In Job 1, things were going so well for Job. Satan came to God and said, "You and Job are thick because there's no trouble in his life. But if you send trouble, it'll be a different story. Job will curse you to Your face." So the Lord said to Satan, "We'll see. Send troubles to Job. Only don't kill him."

The troubles of Job are legendary. They were so bad his own wife told Job to curse God and die. Job struggled to jump the hurdle. I'm amazed how transparent he was even about God. But Job jumped the hurdle of trouble and in the end went even deeper with God. The whole story is about Satan's attempt to disrupt Job's relationship with God through trials and that Job finally jumped over the hurdle.

I think I've figured out what Satan's trying to do with troubles. He wants troubles to make us disappointed with God. If God really loves us, why would He let us suffer so much? If God is really all-powerful, why wouldn't He stop this incredibly bad stuff? If Satan can get us to be dis-appointed with God, it's going to affect our relationship with God. We're going to withdraw our spirit from God to some degree. We'll harbor anything from doubt to anger against Him. I've seen countless people allow troubles to affect their relationship with God. That's what Satan wants.

There's something else I think I've figured out. We can't go deep with God without this hurdle named "Troubles". If we can jump over trouble and pain, we get to go deeper with God. In fact, it's my opinion that the deepest parts of God are accessed only through trials and pain.

How do we want to go deep with God? Worship. Bible studies. Fellowship. Music. Small groups. Books. Sem-inars. All of these things are good and can take us deeper with God. But they're limited. It's the hurdle of trouble that takes us deepest. Why? Trouble is the most profound experience of God—pain and hurt. God had pain when Lucifer revolted. God had pain when the human race fell into sin. God had pain with unfaithful Israel. God had pain when Christ was crucified. God has had 20 centuries of pain with His church. God has pain over the condition of this world. God has pain that people will perish.

God knows all about pain and suffering. It's not until the hurdle named "Troubles" that we can go deep with God and understand His heart. God says, "If you really want to go deep with me, you must experience the fellowship of My sufferings (Phil 3:10)."

My life went cruising along with good things for the most part until 1995. Up to that point, I enjoyed my relationship with God and thought it was deep. The hurdle named "Troubles" was rare. But from that year to this present day, there has been one hurdle after another named "Troubles" in my life. I have felt the hot breath of Satan at each hurdle to doubt or resent God. I could see a doorway to sin.

But by God's grace, I've been able to jump the "Troubles" hurdles. And in doing so, I've found a depth of God which I've never known. A depth of God that could not be known in any other way. Would I have chosen these hurdles? No. Were they fun? Not in any sense. But those hurdles have done more for my relationship with God than anything else ever has.

A great Christian leader once said something like this, "God can't use anyone mightily until He breaks him greatly." I think the same thing is true about going deep with God. I doubt whether anyone can go deep with God until he or she encounters and successfully jumps over the hurdle named "Troubles".

Hurdle #4 is tough. Satan wants that hurdle to keep us from God. But God says, "Jump it and you'll find closeness with Me that can't be found in any other way."

Each of us is going to face at least 4 major hurdles at some point in our journey to go deep with God. We need to recognize that going deep with God is not automatic and not easy. There are going to be things in the way that hinder us.

We talked about the hurdle named "Me". As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Then there's the hurdle we identified as Satan. He works day and night to keep us from God.

Hurdle #3 is the world. We can't love God and the world at the same time. And the last hurdle is troubles. Troubles will either move us away from God or take us deeper with God more than anything else.

Friends, I've found all 4 of these hurdles to be formidable. I've tripped repeatedly over each one of them. But I've gotten up and jumped over them. I expect these hurdles to be there in some form every day. And I've adopted a verse to help me jump them—Psalm 18:29, "By my God I can leap over a wall."

Any one or all 4 of these hurdles can keep you from going deep with God. You better understand that. If you're not going deeper with God, you'd better identify which hurdles are in the way. If you're having trouble seeing a particular hurdle, talk to a godly friend. Have an honest discussion with them. Then ask him or her to support you as you jump those hurdles. Ask them to cheer you on at the sidelines as you do.

If you can jump over these hurdles, you can press on to the deep things of God and maturity. That's what I want for you and that's what I want for me. Don't stop running. And don't stay on the ground if you've tripped. Identify the hurdle that's tripping you up. In the power and name of God, jump it and go deeper with God! There's no other way!