

“Footsteps Away from Changing a Century”

By Pastor Jonathan Stephens, East Side Bible Church of Chicago.

“The steps of a man are established by the Lord, and He delights in his way. When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong, because the Lord is the One who holds his hand.” Psalm 37:23-24.

An Earthquake and Small Steps

This photo is of Mount Fuji, Japan. It has a special place in my heart. It was September 1, 1923, at 11:58am, and my mother was at home very near that mountain, with her family. My mother’s parents were Canadian missionaries to Japan, and my mother was six years old at the time.



At that precise moment in history, 60 kilometers SE of their home, the epicenter of an earthquake struck in Sagami Bay, a few miles south of Tokyo, and became known as one of the worst earthquakes in history; *The Great Kanto Earthquake*. The devastation killed over 143,000 Japanese. By comparison the largest magnitude quake in Japan’s history (9.0), was the 2011 *Tohoku Quake*, which claimed “only” 29,000 lives.

Years later my mother spoke to me, remembering that day, how as a small girl she looked out into the backyard and saw the ground open up into a huge cavern. She was in the doorway, inches from death. If my mother had died right then, I never would have been born 37 years later, nor grown up to marry, nor had four believing children serving Christ. I never would have become a pastor of ESBC these past 31 years. The possibility of taking a few childish steps into a backyard that would have changed 95 years of my family’s history, is mind-boggling! Instead, a 6 year old’s steps were established, preserving a century of my family’s Christian heritage.

We do not know when we will die. So many Japanese went about their normal pursuits that fateful September 1, 1923, having no idea death stalked them. Japan has always been a pagan stronghold. The Japanese then and now pride themselves in supreme self-discipline. But no self-discipline could save the 143,000 Japanese who died on that fateful day.

Earthquakes and Humanity

Self-sufficiency and self-worship are not only Japanese qualities, but run rampant across our planet, where self-exalting humans die daily and end up in hell. On average a *death earthquake* goes off every 60 seconds. 120 humans, on average, die or are killed each minute. Very few of those who die are saved, according to **Matt. 7:13-14**.

What’s my point? My mother as a child was spared by God. 143,000 unsaved Japanese died all around her. That was astounding carnage that was a breath away from my mom, yet did not so much as scratch her 6 year old, helpless arm. The Lord chose to protect 100 years of my believing family yet to come, by protecting mom as a little girl in the middle of the worst earthquake in modern history.

We Christians live and minister on a dangerous planet and must trust in the sovereignty and protective hand of God to continue to do so. This is a foundational principle of the Great Commission. We are called to go into *all* the world with the Gospel – even in dangerous areas, trusting the Lord to protect us as He sees fit, just as He did my mom 95 years ago. We go everywhere, no matter the cost, because our Savior goes with us. When we lose sight of the Lord’s protective hand, we gravitate towards “*safer*” mission fields or stop doing missions.

Earthquakes and our Cities

Fast forward 95 years after the *Kanto Quake*, to where I minister in the crime laden south side of Chicago. A few months ago three gang members were speeding in a stolen vehicle 6 blocks from my church, lost control of the car, crashed, and burned to death in seconds, passing forever into eternal perdition just as the victims of the *Great Kanto Quake* had. They were so young, so violent, so Christ-rejecting, and went instantly from one agonizing fire, forever into another.

The south side of Chicago where my church has been for 118 years, is going up in flames: 60 shot one weekend, dozens dead, 70 another weekend, more dozens slaughtered. It’s mostly due to gangs. The Federal Crime Commission a few years ago estimated there are over 100,000 gang members in Chicago. My wife and I, and our four children have lived in this violence for 31 years, and have been standing on the edge of a *crime*

earthquake daily, and yet the Lord has seen fit to protect us unscathed. Of course, this is not an article that says God will keep bad things away from believers. The words “*witness*” and “*martyr*” in the context of New Testament language are synonyms. Christians are born-again unto suffering, including possible martyrdom. Rather, we serve, we go, and NOTHING happens by chance to a child of God. We may live, or we may die, but our steps are controlled by the Lord, as the passage above states. Have we not been taught that the safest place in all the world for a believer, is in the center of God’s will for his or her life?

Desperate times require desperate words: However, I am not convinced the Church in America believes that. My church is one of only 2 IFCA churches in the city of Chicago. What about other cities? There is only one IFCA church in Phoenix. Six in LA. None in San Francisco. Three in Denver. None in Atlanta. None in Detroit. None in Cleveland. None in Cincinnati. One in Baltimore. None in Indianapolis. One in New Orleans. None in New York City (Astounding!). None in Philadelphia. None in Nashville. None in Houston. None in Dallas. None in Washington, D.C. One in Seattle. None in Milwaukee... Coincidence? Hardly. Take the fertile, wealth-laden crescent of suburbia surrounding Chicago, that starts on the north shore, swings west, then south, then east into NW Indiana, proactively skirting the moral/criminal cesspool of Chicago’s borders. That suburban crescent has 30 IFCA churches. Coincidence?

But let’s not just point the finger at the IFCA, for this is a systemic, spiritual problem in biblical Christianity as a whole in America. The evangelical, fundamental Church has fled the dangerous cities of our nation for decades. Why? Symptomatically it is because of: Money, safety, schools, jobs, property values, and... racism. But causally, it is a crisis of love for Christ, the lost, AND a firm belief that the Lord is NOT the defender of His Church. Foundationally believers run, because they do not trust Christ to protect them. British poet D. H. Lawrence said in his, ***Studies in Classic American Literature*** that, “*The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted.*” He was right, and this scares the living daylights out of believers in this country. We cannot run fast enough from violent humanity.

Yet the history of missions, has been Christians called to go *into* harm’s way to reach the lost, not a call to run from harm and danger. This is a planet with billions of hell-bound, godless sinners on it. How could it not be dangerous for the Church to evangelize such a massive, Christ-hating sea of humanity? 2 in Chicago? 30 in the suburbs? Hmm.

Over the years, most Christian young people tell me they want God’s will, but strangely, almost 100% of the time, they figure God’s will is a nice home, job, and church in suburbia, small town, or rural America, where crime is low and money is high. Sure, non-urban areas of the USA need the Gospel too, but could it really be God’s will to call believers to go anywhere but to the vanquished millions in our cities? A careful examination of the New Testament will show the Apostles and their disciples spread out to cities in the Middle East and Europe. Why? God meant the Gospel is to go where the people are, and today as in the NT context, that means to the cities... the large, bad cities. A massive earthquake has waved outward from our cities in America, caused by self-loving secularized believers seeking socio and economic bliss away from violence.

Earthquakes and Prophecy

There is a terrible *spiritual earthquake* coming: The Lord is returning to first judge His Church, and then the unsaved (**1 Peter 4:17**). It isn’t the only sin of the American Bible-believing church, but it is a whopper one: ***The Church has abandoned the millions in our cities to Satan’s false religions, liberal Protestantism, and the cults because it loves its safety, homogeny, and possessions, more than it loves Christ and the lost.*** We have betrayed the Great Commission. For decades many have severely criticized me for speaking this truth above. Yet the cars continue to crash, the murders pile up, and the few good churches left are closing as Christians pack their bags as fast as they possibly can.

One suburban Christian said to me after my sermon in another church where I was sharing our ministry in Chicago, “*Oh I could never do that.*” End of story. Why? She couldn’t do it. She had made up her mind. Not for her! Uh-uh! No need for prayer. No need to consider one’s ways. Multiply that mentality by millions of believers and we realize why missions is dying. Believers en masse have selectively ignored the millions in our cities due to panicked physical, economic self-preservation combined with entrenched worldliness.

Blind Earthquakes

Believers are deceived if they think safety is found in a *Jonah Syndrome* of fleeing people and areas they don't like. My mom stayed deathly still in a doorway at 6 years of age because Christ's invisible hand was on her shoulder holding her back, and thus changed the course of my family for a century. What sovereign power!! Worldly Christians for the last 100 years have chosen to NOT stay put but have "run," because the invisible, sovereign, protective hand of the Lord has been irrelevant to them.

This monumental paradigm shift for decades has vanquished the course of biblical Christianity. The *Greatest Generation* of believers came home from war to recover and work. They gave birth to *Baby Boomer* Christians who advanced the "God blesses through wealth" equation, who promptly exited to live in growing affluent enclaves, the likes of which our world has never seen. They gave birth to greedy, self-centered *GenX* Christians who live for money and job while still trying to bow their knee to Christ's Lordship. That doesn't work so well. They are giving birth to *Millennial* "believers" who have raised up a defiant philosophy of, "no one is going to tell me what to do," and who have abandoned biblical fundamentalism to arrogantly go forth and conquer, recreating the Church in their own heretical "conversational" youth-oriented image. That is a multigenerational, massive spiritual earthquake that has leveled The Faith once for all delivered, fomenting systemic apostasy, framed and nurtured by greed, and fed by a philosophical abandonment of the lost to hell, while ranting that the lost were never lost to begin with.

Purposeful Earthquakes

Are we only here to feed our self-obsession by: eating, working, and playing? What is our purpose as born-again Christians? The Bible tells us plainly: "***For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, ... so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.***" (2 Cor. 5:13-14).

50,000 unbelievers live in a 5 square mile area around my church. I have 35 Christians in my church on a good Sunday. That's it. There are no other biblically fundamental churches anywhere near this entire section of Chicago. Where are the believers who long to see the downtrodden masses hear the Gospel, and care *not* to live a vain life of gratuitous self-preservation? Where are the courageous soldiers of the Cross willing to move with their families back into our cities? Won't you please come back and join our 15 IFCA churches in our cities?

Consider carefully the steps of your life. Those small spiritual steps you take each day could very well change the course of your life and many others for years to come in either a good or a bad way. What will it be? Safety? Netflix at night? Money? Security? ... or joining 15 solitary IFCA lighthouses, which are shining brightly across the dark bays of 7 spiritually abandoned cities?

*"Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell;
I want to run a rescue shop, within a yard of hell."*

C.T. Studd.



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