



*Passion Lives Here
Questions and Reflections
on Spiritual Passion*

Passion Lives Here

By Paul and Janice Meiburger

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Cover picture by Claudio Pallard

This booklet was written by Paul Meiburger in order to address the personal need to keep strong in his love and passion for Jesus and His ministry. Janice helped by editing / re-writing the text to make it more readable and interesting. Paul and Janice serve at "Il Rifugio", an Evangelical Christian Church at the University of Turin, Italy. You can read more about their family and ministry at the end of this booklet.



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PASSION LIVES HERE

Banners and posters littered the streets and buildings of Torino, Italy, in anxious anticipation of hosting the 2006 Winter Olympics. Three words formed her motto: “Passion Lives Here”. The city came alive with the competition of the sports and the flood of humanity which came to view it on Italian soil. The following summer, only a few months after the final ceremony of the Olympic games, Italy’s passion for soccer culminated in a victory over neighboring France, capturing the 2006 World Cup. The city literally went crazy in celebration late into the night.

Shortly after arriving in Italy in 2000, we realized that passion, in many different forms, seemed to define the Italians. An open display of affection seemed to be the norm. Couples passionately kissed on park benches, without shame or embarrassment; a father openly held hands with his adolescent son; even college-aged girls held hands as they walked together to class, symbolic only of friendship.

Yet it is hard to find a rival for Italy’s passion for food. Food to an Italian is not just a means to sustain him; it is a measure of his standard of living. Italians take great pride in the quality and freshness of their food, and frankly, find no equal in any other foreign

cuisine. Recently I heard an Italian share about how he found peace with God, comparing it to Italian food while every other food represented the peace which the world offered.

Although Italians savor life as they savor food, there is one area in which they sorely lack passion: spiritual hunger. This short booklet will explore this kind of passion which should live first and foremost in our heart for God. Yet often our passion for God wanes over time. Struggling to keep the flames of spiritual passion alive, can we re-ignite our first love for God?

1. What is Spiritual Passion?

“Clarity of mind means clarity of passion, too; this is why a great and clear mind loves ardently and sees distinctly what he loves.”

- Blaine Pascal

What is passion? Is it a feeling or an emotion that drives us to action? Or is it rational? Is it both, and if so, where do they intersect? The 16th century French mathematician, philosopher and theologian quoted above combined his reason with love and passion in an effort to understand and know the infinite God. Noah Webster in his 1828 dictionary defined passion as “a feeling of the mind manifesting

itself as zeal, love, or ardent desire”. Surely passions can move a man to act without reason. Similarly, too much reason can move us to act without feeling. Yet we cannot separate our passions from our mind or will any more than we can remove our soul from our body. True passion must engage our mind, will and emotions; otherwise, it becomes just another sentimental feeling that comes and goes.

Hollywood romantic movies are laced with “they lived happily ever” plot lines, rarely moving beyond the honeymoon phase of a relationship into the real challenges of life. Personally I like movies with happy endings, but couples married for any length of time know that storms are also a part of the marriage experience, and in fact, can deepen the bond of love between spouses.

To keep the passion enflamed, many Christian husbands have weekly dates with their wives. We also schedule an annual “mini-moon” and during our most recent anniversary mini-moon, Janice mentioned how she prefers the daily demonstrations of love and affection more than the “big events” like an anniversary getaway. However, both are necessary. In both cases, true passion manifests itself by moving beyond the feelings into a rational commitment to make the relationship work, even during the challenging periods of life.

What is spiritual passion? We live in a world that aggressively and unashamedly competes for our time and attention. Unlike the agrarian lifestyles of the past, most of us today are pushed into a schedule that leaves little time and energy for recharging our souls. We are constantly bombarded with advertisements like flashing neon signs telling us we need even more, creating a discontentment with increased pressures, sometimes approaching dangerously explosive levels.

In this type of environment, true spiritual passion sees beyond the maze of distractions to the subtle reflections of a deeper reality. It's no wonder we cannot hear God gently knocking on our door; the volume on the TV is too loud.

Pursuing spiritual passion is much like an athlete training for the Olympics—the daily discipline of weight training, running and practice is driven by the distant glimmer of a future prize. A spiritually passionate person will live a life of full devotion to Jesus Christ, but unlike the Olympian, his victory is already secured. The fire emanates from the Holy Spirit rather than himself and results in a growing, contagious, joy-filled faith that overcomes rather than is overcome. It flows from an intimacy with God that fills to the brim and then overflows into the

lives of others.

Contagious joy, growing faith, intimacy with God: these are the trademarks of spiritual passion. Do they characterize your life? To be completely frank, they do not always reflect mine. It was one of the reasons I wanted to explore this topic more.

2. Who Has Spiritual Passion?

An Iranian friend of mine recently became a Christian. During a small group meeting, we discussed the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. When he returned home, he stayed up until 5:00 a.m. studying for himself these radically paradoxical truth nuggets. His thirst overcame his need for sleep. I returned home and went to bed. His passion for the Word at times puts me to shame. His release from the hate and bondage of Islam into a new eternal love relationship with Jesus makes him all the more passionate for the Son of God.

I have spoken to a number of people recently about their level of passion for the Lord. Over the years, I have observed my own life and the lives of other Christians, both new believers and well-seasoned ones. Some new believers seem to jump out of the starting block and run the race long and steady. Others seem to start off strong, but then lose heart

and slip into mediocrity, even almost dropping out of the race altogether. Why do some seem to press on with passion, while others stagger through their spiritual lives?

Like I said before, I wrote this booklet partly for myself. I characterize myself as a moderately passionate person, moving in and out of passionate seasons in my walk with the Lord. Even in high school, I saw this tendency in the way I played basketball. While my skill level was perhaps better than most, my lack of aggressiveness on the court would really frustrate my coach. I never seemed to have that passion to go after the ball at all costs.

While it may seem overly simplistic, some still use descriptions such as “Type A” or “Type B” personalities. The Type A personality is more driven in what he does; he is ambitious and aggressive, and can be controlling and overly competitive. The Type B personality is the opposite—patient, relaxed, at times easygoing to a fault, and can lack an overriding sense of urgency in things he does.

We see these personality differences emerge in Jesus’ disciples. Peter would be the passionate, eruptive one whereas Thomas seemed a little more reserved or even cautious. God’s sovereign choice and the environment He placed us in seem to define our

personality. But to what extent is our level of passion a function of our personality? Can a lack of spiritual passion be attributed to our personality, or do our passions simply express themselves in different ways? We are all called to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves.

3. The Importance of Spiritual Passion

Passion adds spark and vitality to life. But is it possible to manufacture passion? I remember running track and field in high school, an endeavor I undertook solely because my basketball coach said it would help my game by staying in shape. Personally I hate running (but I love to have run). I was chosen to compete in the 120-yard hurdles, and after much practice, the day of my first race arrived. I was the last person to reach the first hurdle, but I scaled it adequately. I was not as fortunate on the second one, falling hard to the ground. Everyone else was about six hurdles ahead of me, so I started to walk off the track. My coach yelled and gave me such a stern reprimand, “You NEVER walk off the track. You ALWAYS finish the race”, I quickly got back to my lane and completed the race.

I was not familiar with the sacred rule of “finishing the race”. I did complete the year of running track,

but with little improvement. However, I did learn the importance of finishing every race. I still feel more the sting of embarrassment at being called out by my coach for giving up on the race than finishing long after all the other hurdlers. One aspect of spiritual passion is finishing the race. I hope none of us experience the shame of walking off the track.

4. Obstacles to Spiritual Passion

Spiritual passion usually doesn't dry up in one fell swoop; there are factors or obstacles which spring up to sabotage our walk with the Lord. I would like to discuss just a few of these.

Hypocrisy in others, or the fear of being a hypocrite ourselves, could cause us to slip into a spiritually passive state. Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus' indignation at hypocrisy, most notably among the Pharisees. Young people especially yearn to see the genuine article, and are quick to sniff out false spirituality. However, our actions seem to often be an unconscious mix of good and selfish motives. Jesus was the only Person with completely pure motives, who both pleased His Father and loved and served the needs of those around Him.

In some ways, we are all hypocrites, so why do we let the hypocrisy in others keep us from the only

Person who had pure motives? If we see it in ourselves, we need to confess it, repent, thank God for His forgiveness, ask Him to purify our motives, and get on with God rather than beat ourselves up for not being perfect like Jesus. If we see hypocrisy in others, we need to recognize that we are no different from them before a holy and perfect God, accept their imperfections and move on.

Disillusionment might be another powerful obstacle to maintaining spiritual passion, especially when it involves the sin of a once-respected spiritual leader, friend or mentor. Some of King David's closest friends betrayed him, as a prophetic foretaste of how Judas would betray Jesus. In Psalm 55, David pours out his heart before God. The wound of a friend has so much more potential to harm us than an enemy.

Satan revels in disuniting believers in a church, because as others watch, it becomes like the radioactive fallout of a nuclear bomb, causing immediate and residual destruction. What is our defense against this fallout? Some go underground and shield themselves in a thick layer of self-protection. Others lash out, providing more ammunition to an already explosive situation. Others simply walk away.

We need to allow the grace and power of God to

reduce the “half-life”(1) of our hurt. God does not want us to go into hiding, wearing an impenetrable suit of armor the rest of our lives, nor go on the offensive. Psalm 55 closes with David’s solution to his pain of betrayal with the encouragement to “Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved” (v.22). Restoration of our spiritual passion comes only through acceptance and entrusting our disillusionment to the Lord who never disappoints.

Idolatry is another obvious obstacle to spiritual passion. I like to define it as anything that replaces God as first place in our hearts or lives. Even though God rightly deserves supreme place in our hearts, it is often too easy to allow other gods into our lives. We slowly begin to bow our knees to other things like relationships, entertainment, computers or even our reputations. These things, in and of themselves, are not evil, but the extent to which we give our hearts to them determines the degree of rivalry to God’s throne in our hearts. When the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team was in the playoffs this past season, they became a type of idol in my life. I found myself checking the scores often, taking an almost obsessive interest in baseball. Though not inherently evil, it showed me how misplaced my priorities could be.

So then how do we deal with idolatry wherever we may find it in our lives? We repent! We ask God to retake first place in our heart and life. When that happens, life becomes simpler and better. If we are spiritually dull or lack spiritual passion, we should ask God to reveal to us if there are any hidden idols in our lives. A trusted friend might also be an instrument in God's hands to help in this process. The Lord will answer our sincere prayer requests to reveal idolatry in our hearts. We may be afraid to pray this, or we may not like the answer, but we must remember that is ALWAYS best when God regains supremacy over our hearts. In contrast, David wrote "The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply" (Psalm 16:4).

Frustration over recurring sin can often sap the spiritual vitality out of a life. Simply put, "sin separates us from God". It was true in the days of Adam and Eve; it is just as true today. In Christ, because of His sacrifice on the cross, true believers are positionally reconciled with God, forgiven of every sin, and given the promise of eternal life. However, recurring sin has the potential to obscure these biblical truths in our minds. The practice of "spiritual breathing" can help us maintain close fellowship with the Lord. We learn to always confess any known sin, which is like exhaling it from our lives; then we learn to inhale, asking the Holy

Spirit to again fill up our lives with His power to walk in a way pleasing to God. Dr. Bill Bright called this process the “Spirit-filled life”.

Andrea Testa, my son-in-law and one of the servant-leaders at il rifugio, recently preached powerfully from Ephesians 4:17-24, where Paul discusses the process of taking off the old self and putting on the new self. Christ took off our filthy garments and replaced them with His robe of righteousness. What a wonderful truth, but too often we return to the slop and filth of the world. Andrea closed with Romans 12:2 “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect”. Our frustration over sin and living in the world can result in a spiritual drought, so it is mandatory that we consistently see life and truth through the sieve of the Word of God.

Doubts are a part of life and part of the Christian life as well. Many of us do not like to talk about the lingering questions or doubts we might have about God, faith or the Bible. We think that it is not spiritual to express doubts, so we bury them deep inside. But to deny doubts is to give them power, and if allowed to fester, doubts can destroy spiritual passion.

So how do we deal with doubts? They often stem from either honest questions that haunt us when we are alone, or tragedy that we just simply cannot accept or explain. An initial good course of action could be to articulate and write them down in a journal. Often when the doubts, fears or angers at the root of our doubts are not examined and clarified, they can swirl around in our heads in a type of nebulous mist that cannot be grasped or understood. Or a close friend can often serve as a sounding board for our doubts as long as we feel we are being heard and not judged.

If we have serious and honest questions regarding the reality of God, Jesus and the Bible, we must take the time and effort to thoroughly investigate our questions. Many people have had amazing testimonies of how they sought to disprove God and the Bible but in the end became convinced of the veracity of both. Books by Josh McDowell, Philip Yancey and Lee Strobel, to mention only a few, have helped millions of honest seekers resolve some of their haunting questions about God, Jesus and the Bible.

I will never forget the story of Immanuel, an Iranian believer who adopted that name on the day I baptized him. One day at the il rifugio student center, he

became very excited and beckoned me to join him to watch a video on YouTube. It was Lee Strobel's "Reliability of Christ's Resurrection". As he re-watched the evidences for Christ's resurrection, he became convinced that Christ was the Son of God and not just a prophet as he had been taught to believe all his life. The evidence for God as revealed in Jesus Christ was overwhelming to Immanuel and laid to rest for him who the true God really was.

After a serious tragedy or the loss of a loved one, it is easy to entertain questions about why God allowed these things to happen. Recently the school massacre in Ridgefield, Connecticut, combined with all the increasingly violent horrors of our day, can cause us to believe that God is either not good, or He is not all-powerful. We have heard the argument: if God is good, then He must not be all-powerful or He would prevent these things from happening; if God is all-powerful, then He must not be good since He allows these things to happen. In the aftermath of tragedy, it is important to cling to the fact that God is by nature always good and just, even if we from our limited perspective cannot understand it.

One word of caution: Oftentimes the questions we ask do not have answers, at least not on this side of heaven. The temptation for Christians is to speak when and where God has not. Where God remains

silent, we must also be silent. God is not obligated to provide answers for every question or explain why He allows tragedies to occur. Death entered the world when sin entered the world. We would do well to learn the lesson revealed in the book of Job who lost all his children, his property, and his health: God never answered the question of why Job had to endure such suffering and loss, and Job was okay with that.

Fatigue might be another obstacle to persevering spiritual passion.

Stress and burn-out have a way of wreaking havoc in our bodies, minds, souls and spirits. Fatigue can short-circuit our day-to-day attitudes, give us tunnel vision and cause huge health problems. It is no wonder, then, that one of God's 10 commandments includes keeping the sabbath holy. Rest is God's idea and when we neglect it, we pay the consequences.

However, keeping the sabbath does not just mean we refrain from work and pursue our own agendas. Resting in God's presence and focusing on Him is the optimum use of the sabbath and will help keep our spiritual passions alive and well. Over the years, I have also developed the habit of trying to get a DAWG day once per month—a Day Alone with God (a godly brother shared this acronym at a conference,

explaining it is pronounced the way a southerner says “dog”). A good DAWG day always includes a good nap, “For He gives to His beloved sleep” (Psalm 127:2). Lack of sleep can result in chemical imbalances and cause a downward spiral in our spiritual health. Some might think that truly spiritually passionate people give themselves tirelessly to the cause of Christ and at times, that may be required. But it is also true that they must learn the discipline of sufficient sleep. Even Jesus needed times to get away and recharge His soul.

5. Losing our Spiritual Passion

One of the most significant consequences to losing our spiritual passion is becoming ineffective for God and His purposes. The loss of joy and satisfaction in one’s relationship with the Lord and others also characterize those whose spiritual passion has waned. Jesus spoke much about joy in His last teaching on the night before He went to Calvary. Twice he used the phrase “that your joy might be made full”. But joy cannot be manufactured; it comes from a life of obedient submission and grateful trust, living in the center of His will.

Without spiritual passion, we slowly slip into a life of mediocrity which resembles those in the world. A compelling question to ask ourselves is “Could a

non-Christian live the life I'm living today?" If the answer is affirmative, then it is probably true that we are living more for ourselves than God and by our own strength, not His.

When we begin to lose spiritual passion, our desire to spend time with the Lord and His people diminishes, relegated to an obligation rather than a delight. Without these two critical aspects of the Christian life, sin not only becomes more appealing but inevitable. We become easy prey for Satan and his heinous schemes of deception and lies, viewing the world not from a godly, eternal perspective, but from a fleshly, temporal one.

A true believer in Christ can never lose his salvation, but there is an aspect of "falling away" from intimacy with God that has destructive consequences, one of which is an unbelieving and hardened heart. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews warns us to exhort one another every day, so that none of us may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. We have seen firsthand the aftermath of hardened hearts left to themselves, and it is not a pretty sight.

6. Restoring our Spiritual Passion

I can recall numerous times during our engagement period when I would rush to Janice's apartment to pick her up. I just could not wait to see her and spend time with her. The contrast in taking her home was marked: I drove very slowly and didn't want the evening to end. I loved Janice and could not wait to get married so that I would no longer have to take her home at the end of our time together.

Ideally, this should be our attitude toward spending time with the Lord as well, but unfortunately, that doesn't always reflect mine. I would love to have a heart that would always race to be with Him and then linger long in His presence, not wanting to end our time of intimate fellowship. My periodic lack of passion for Jesus was the original motivation for writing this booklet. I knew my heart was not red-hot for Him.

Realizing this a few years ago, I began to pray that I would learn what it meant to love God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind. Jesus says this is the first and foremost commandment, and it is God's standard for us in regards to our passion for Him. My question is, "How strong is your passion for Jesus?" If it is not what you would like it to be, then I suggest that you stop now and examine your heart,

and sincerely ask the Lord to make it your heart's desire. It begins with repentance and prayer, and the conviction that the Lord loves to answer the prayer according to His will.

Other practical steps can be taken to increase our spiritual passion and prepare us for the long-distance race set before us.

Be with passionate people. It is very true that we become like those we are with. Fire lights fire. Spending time with people who have a genuine heart and passion for God will cause our hearts to catch on fire. Pray and ask God to bring these kinds of people into your lives. Take initiative with them. Invite them into your life and get involved with what they are doing.

Avoid the pitfalls. Review briefly the Obstacles to Spiritual Passion in Section 4. Take one or two of these obstacles which commonly stumble you and take positive steps to avoid them. Watch for patterns or seasons of life where you might be most vulnerable and take extra caution during these dangerous periods.

Repent from any known sin. Living in known sin will definitely sap our spiritual passion. Practice walking in the light by sharing failures and sin to

God and others. Make accountability a priority and do not use the excuse that others will judge you to avoid it.

Get extended times with the Lord. One of the best disciplines I have developed over the years is making time for regular Days Alone with God. My desire is to have one at least once a month. Then once per quarter I try to spend an overnighter with the Lord. Every year I try to get 2-3 days with the Lord to review and re-envision my life and heart. I preach this practice whenever I can to whomever will listen, because it has been so beneficial to me.

Step out in faith. Faith is like a muscle. If it is not being used, it atrophies. Fear or feelings of inadequacy can always sabotage our faith and prevent us from taking the necessary steps for growth. We need to simply believe God when He says that His strength is perfected in our weakness. On the other hand, faith that is always being exercised and challenged will grow even stronger and accomplish great things for God.

7. Conclusion

Stoking the flames of spiritual passion is not a one-time event. It requires work, diligence and perseverance. Inevitably, storms will ravage our lives and threaten to unravel the fabric of our sometimes fragile faith. Even in the normal flow of life, we regularly experience cycles of highs and lows. Being aware of these cycles will help us know when we are more vulnerable and when we need to take special effort to stay strong. During these times, I know I need an extended time with God or the encouragement of others.

As we practice some of the principles described in this booklet and set our hearts on the pursuit of the God who pursues us daily, we will discover that our spiritual passion will grow more consistent and alive.

*Yet I still belong to you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
leading me to a glorious destiny.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
I desire you more than anything on earth.
My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak,
but God remains the strength of my heart;
he is mine forever.*

Psalms 73:23-26

Paul and Janice Meiburger



The Meiburger Family moved to Italy in the year 2000 to help start a university church at the University of Turin. At that time, Erin and Kristen were 17 and 14 respectively. God used this decision to shape our lives in marvelous ways and influence the lives of many others from all parts of the world. Twelve years later, there are few regrets. In 2008 Erin married Ben Bringardner, a fellow missionary who served in Italy, and they now have two children, Matteo and Amalie. They currently live in Dallas, Texas. In 2011 Kristen married Andrea Testa, an Italian leader in our church, and they continue to live in Turin.

The church they helped plant is called Il Rifugio, a university church that is composed of young people and families from all over the world.



Our goal at Il Rifugio is to follow Jesus' Great Commission, which means to disciple men and women and help them to follow Jesus with all their hearts. Our mission is to give birth to new communities of Jesus' disciples that will reflect the LIGHT (Italian word LUCE) of Jesus in Torino, Italy and to the world. Luce is the Italian acronym as follows:

Lodare – WORSHIP God with all our lives and hearts

Unirsi – To be UNITED in fellowship

Crescere – GROW in the use of our gifts and talents

Espondere – to EXPAND God's love for others, both inside and outside of our community.

Pray with us as we serve to raise up national believers who will fulfill this goal and mission, and for God's wisdom as he leads us to new places in the future. If you are led by God to financially invest in this ministry, you can contact Great Commission Ministries. Contact information is in the front of this booklet or you can go on-line at www.gcmweb.org/getinvolved/Give.