

Have you ever found yourself facing a situation that just seemed too difficult for you? A challenge that you didn't think you could face, a problem that just seemed insurmountable. We're starting a new series this week, going through the book of Joshua, which describes the events that take place after the Israelites leave Egypt and begin to set up their own nation. Moses, one of the most powerful prophets and leaders in the entire Bible, has passed away, and now it's up to Joshua to take his place as leader of the nation. He has some pretty big shoes to fill. How in the world is he going to take the place of the greatest leader his people have ever seen?

In the beginning of the book of Joshua, we see God speak to Joshua. Joshua 1:7-9

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. <sup>8</sup> Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. <sup>9</sup> Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

Notice that the thing God directs Joshua to in order to encourage him to be strong is the Bible; the books Moses had written under God's direction. Rather than focus on the situation they're in, the enemy nations that want to kill them, the uncertainty of how they'll get resources, God wants Joshua to fix his attention on the words God has already given. God is unchanging and powerful; as our gaze is fixed on Him, the problems of this world just don't seem so bad anymore.

We all go through times like this in life, when our challenges seem too difficult to handle. Lara and I were both thinking about this topic last week, thinking about this passage, and there was a scene that came to our minds from the Lord of the Rings. This is early on in the story, Frodo has volunteered to travel to a very dangerous land in order to destroy the evil ring of Sauron, and he's afraid. This is a far more dangerous challenge than he ever imagined facing, and in despair he sits next to Gandalf, saying "I wish it need not have happened in my time."

"So do I," Gandalf responds, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

This is an emotion we will all struggle with at some point, "Why do I have to go through this?" Why can't life be simple, without these problems? As Armenians, maybe we're thinking about this even more now that Azerbaijan is again attacking Armenia while the rest of the world abandons us. With everything else we've been through as a people, why do we again face an enemy that wants nothing short of a genocide? You can let that emotion overwhelm you, or you can focus on the promises and character of God, who sees us through these difficult times. Our strength comes from focusing on God's word, on His commands, because then we can see clearly what to do with the time that is given to us. Frodo had his mission, and we have our own missions too. And just like in Lord of the Rings, we have our promise that evil will one day

be destroy completely, and God will claim the final victory. No matter what happens, we're on the winning side, and that is an encouraging thought.

One of the most iconic scenes in the Lord of the Rings is the moment when the fellowship of the ring is formed. There is a meeting where all the leaders realize that the only way to destroy the evil ring of Sauron is to throw it into the volcano in his territory, a very dangerous mission. The problem is, nobody trusts anyone else in this meeting. Everyone is worried that the power of the ring will be too great of a temptation, and that the ring will corrupt whoever attempts the mission, or at the very least they'll be killed during such a suicidal quest. As everyone shouts at each other, the young hobbit Frodo steps forward, and volunteers to take the ring to Mordor. The meeting grows silent, everyone in awe of Frodo's bravery, and one by one volunteers step forward to help.

#### Video clip

9 companions, each with their own skill and expertise to bring. Each one willing to make tremendous sacrifice for the sake of the entire world. We're continuing through the book of Joshua, and one of the things we were talking about this week is the importance of us each having our own part to play in God's kingdom. No matter your gifts, no matter your skills; everyone has something to bring to the table. As we see Joshua prepare to lead Israel into the land they would inherit, he calls all the 12 tribes together. 2 of the tribes and half the tribe of Manasseh have already settled into their territory east of the Jordan river, but now the time came to cross over the Jordan and claim the rest of the land. But Joshua knows, they're going to need everyone together to win these battles; if 2 and a half tribes stay behind, they'll be much weaker. Look what happens in Joshua 1:10-16

<sup>10</sup> So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: <sup>11</sup> "Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your provisions ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you for your own.'"

<sup>12</sup> But to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joshua said, <sup>13</sup> "Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you after he said, 'The LORD your God will give you rest by giving you this land.' <sup>14</sup> Your wives, your children and your livestock may stay in the land that Moses gave you east of the Jordan, but all your fighting men, ready for battle, must cross over ahead of your fellow Israelites. You are to help them <sup>15</sup> until the LORD gives them rest, as he has done for you, and until they too have taken possession of the land the LORD your God is giving them. After that, you may go back and occupy your own land, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you east of the Jordan toward the sunrise."

<sup>16</sup> Then they answered Joshua, "Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go."

Each tribe, each individual, has a role to play. Too often in life, you'll see people focused just on what's beneficial to themselves. Once they get their objective, they no longer have a motivation to help others. You might also find people that want to help, but feel like they just don't have enough to bring to the table. They don't know enough, they don't have enough skill.

Both these attitudes can cause us to miss out on the chance to partner with God in the work that He's doing. And we all have a way to partner; a ministry God wants us to contribute to. Look what Paul writes in Romans 12:3-8

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. <sup>4</sup> For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

We have different gifts, but never think that one gift is more important than the others, we each have our part to play. Each of Frodo's companions brought their own gifts, and each played a vital role in making sure their mission was successful. Some brought skill, some magic, some wisdom and cleverness, but the team wouldn't have been able to save the world had even one of them was missing. Maybe we aren't saving the world from a gigantic evil eye tower thing, but we each have our missions, so let's be faithful in carrying them out.

Every good master villain needs an army of minions to command, and there are few armies of minions more iconic than the stormtroopers of Star Wars. Always wearing their armor, faces masked, trained their whole lives for battle, they are a powerful force to be reckoned with...unless they're shooting at the protagonists, in which case they can never seem to hit a target...

That's what makes the opening of *The Force Awakens* so interesting. As we start getting introduced to the new characters in the story, we find a Stormtrooper, FN-2187 deciding that he doesn't want to stay on the bad guy team any more. When the First Order captures a resistance fighter, he takes the opportunity to free him and escape together.

#### Video clip

Going through Joshua this week, we were looking at the story of Rahab, who decides to hide the visiting Israelites and ask them for protection when Israel attacks to take Jericho. At first glance, she kind of seems like a traitor to her city. Rather than turn these Israelites in, she lies to the officials of the city, and says the men already left, sending the officials off on a wild goose chase. As we learn more though, she reveals that in fact the whole city is in fear, knowing that God's judgment on them is coming. They know what happened to Egypt 40 years ago, they know what happened to some of the other nearby nations when they tried to attack the Israelites when they were in a weaker state, and now the Israelites are at the doorstep of Jericho, ready to cross over the Jordan river for the attack.

But Rahab realizes, it's not too late to join the winning side. It's not too late to repent from the life she was living, she was actually a prostitute in the city, and turn to God. And in fact, this option is always on the table, it was an option that was available to each and every person in Jericho, and in every city Joshua leads his people to fight. We actually see this later in the book of Joshua, Rahab and her family aren't the only ones to turn around and decide to join God's people. And Rahab's family isn't just awarded with safety, we find out later that Rahab actually marries an Israelite from the tribe of Judah, a man named Salmon. You remember the story of Ruth we talked about a few months ago, and a man named Boaz? Rahab was actually Boaz's mother, and she's actually listed in the genealogy of Jesus. Pretty awesome turnaround for someone who was living an immoral life in an immoral city.

And that's one of the things we need to remember as Christians; God loves the humble, repentant heart. 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 says

<sup>16</sup> So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> God

made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Those who are in Christ are a new creation, and it's never too late for a turnaround. I often see people who are convinced that they are too far gone to be saved, that God would never welcome a sinner like them into His midst. Even more, I've seen Christians who look at others thinking, "Oh, that person, they're too far gone. It's too late for them to turn things around." And, that's just not true. The offer of salvation extends to everyone, and as followers of Christ we should never turn away anyone who seeks it. Just like Finn, who decides to leave the life of evil behind him, we want to see more people choose to walk away from the path that will inevitably result in destruction by exploding death star.

Perhaps the most iconic scene in all of star wars is the moment when Luke blows up the death star. The situation looks desperate, he's flying closer to the target, and as his targeting computer locks on to the exhaust port, the ghostly spirit of his mentor, Obi Wan Kanobi, calls out to him to use the force instead of relying on the computer. After a brief moment of hesitation, Luke switches off the computer, and uses the connection he has to the force to hit his target, and eliminate the threat of the death star. And there is much rejoicing.

Looking at the fall of Jericho this week, we realize there are times in life when the right thing to do, the right strategy to use, isn't always the logical, well planned out one. Rather than enact a military strategy for taking the city, the Israelites just march around the city for 7 days, and on the 7<sup>th</sup> day the walls collapse. They're doing this in obedience to God, and it show that God is sovereign over this battle. The Israelites won't be winning these battles on their own strength, but rather in under God's direction.

We may not be conquering cities, but we have our own battles to fight, and we seek God's guidance for it. Paul writes in Ephesians 6, verses 12 and 13

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. <sup>13</sup> Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

And again, in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. <sup>4</sup> The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. <sup>5</sup> We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

We live in a world where we're commonly given bad ideas for how to be successful in life. You might be told that you need to obtain power, or wealth. If you have a problem with someone else, you need to attack them and tear them down. You need to seek your own pleasure or happiness first, over concern for others. Maybe you're told to celebrate vices, like pride, or greed, or laziness.

Let's see what God's instructions are in Romans 12

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

<sup>9</sup> Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. <sup>11</sup> Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

<sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.  
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."  
<sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

These ideas are often ones that the world thinks are foolish. Forgiving your enemies, blessing the people who are mean to you, honoring other people above yourself; these are ways we fight battles that are different than the way the world fights battles. When we thrive doing these things, we show that God's power is at work in us.

So what should we do? Do your best to read the Bible, to understand what God calls us to do, train yourself in wisdom so you can recognize right and wrong. And more importantly, be praying each day, for the wisdom and insight to know what to do. God will lead us if we turn to him, and while we probably won't be breaking down the walls of cities or blowing up death stars, we'll still have our victories, and in the end, we know God is in control, and He's with us.



<sup>12</sup> Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

<sup>13</sup> When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup> but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. <sup>15</sup> Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

One of the most engaging parts of a protagonist’s journey is how they handle temptations. Whether it’s how Frodo resists the allure of the power of the one ring, or Luke refusing to join the dark side with Darth Vader, the real power of a hero is not their physical strength or skills, but their ability to say no to what is wrong. A few weeks ago we looked at the story of Achan in Joshua chapter 7, where Achan gives in to greed and disobeys the command God gave to Israel. God told the Israelites not to steal anything from the city of Jericho after conquering it, but while going through the city Achan sees a nice robe and some gold and silver, and decides to take it for himself. This doesn’t seem like much, we’re talking about an entire city here, who’s going to care about just one robe and a little bit of money? But once he does this, God removes his protection from Israel. The very next battle they go in to, they lose and are forced to retreat. All because one man gave in to greed.

One of the most important things for the Christian walk is to understand how we deal with temptations. In this passage, James wants to emphasize is we can’t blame anyone else for the temptations we fight. People might be tempted to say, “Well, God is in charge of everything, so if I face temptation or give in to temptation, it’s really God’s fault. It’s not my responsibility.” The reality is the source of our temptations is our own desires. For that reason, we really need to understand what our desires are, and which desires are good and which are bad. This is especially important now, as we live in a culture that often tells us that we should pursue anything we desire; if you want it, go for it. If you desire it, it must be a good thing.

Let’s look at how Jesus was tempted after his baptism. Satan comes to him after he’s been fasting, and offers him three temptations. The first temptation is to supernaturally create food to eat. After all, Jesus had been fasting for quite a while, and was certainly hungry. Why not take advantage of his power, the same power that created the entire universe, and just create food for himself. But Jesus refuses, because that’s not how his power is supposed to be used. He wasn’t here to use his power for his own personal gain and comfort, but rather to use his power for the sake of others. He also knows that this is a time for fasting and seeking God; the word of God was his food, not just bread. There would be time for feasting and rest after, but now was not the time.

We too will always have the desires to satisfy our physical needs. To sleep, to eat, to be comfortable. And there is a time for that. But there’s also a time to go without comfort, to maybe not eat everything we would like, maybe not get a full night sleep because there’s work to do. When I go to Haiti on missions trips, I’m going without comfort for a while. We don’t

have unlimited food like we have here in the US, so I don't necessarily get to eat anything I want. We make sacrifices to help those in need. Likewise in life, we need to recognize when the right time to sacrifice is, and resist the desire to focus just on ourselves.

Another temptation Satan brings is for Jesus to jump off the highest building in the area, to prove to the world that his angels would always protect him. To show off his power and his glory. This would have given Jesus great recognition and admiration, something we all want. We want people to know us, to respect us. We want love and community. And these are good things. But there's a right way to pursue them and a wrong, self-centered way to pursue them. It's true that angels were protecting Jesus, but Jesus also points out that we shouldn't try to test God like that. The whole, "ok God, if you're real, do this for me." Trying to conduct experiments or tests to see if God is going to protect us or something to that extent.

Now it's true that we should act with the faith that God is watching and protecting us, but those actions need to be based on obedience to God, rather than just acting on our own whims. It's not a license to be foolish, but rather to take what Jesus says seriously when he talks about difficult things like loving our enemies or sacrificing to give to those in need. And when we are faithful to God in those things, we will find that we gain the love and respect and community we desire, but it's because we put others first, rather than worrying about our reputation and image first.

Then of course the last temptation is that of power. All Jesus has to do is bow down and worship Satan, and he could be ruler of the whole world. Rather than going through the path of suffering to the cross, he could just be a king now. After all, isn't that what he's supposed to be? The desire for strength and power is a great temptation. And these things can be tools used for good purposes, but they should never be the goals themselves. More important than the strength to rule nations is the strength to live righteously, to do good even when it's hard.

At the end of the day, all these desires can be good, but the way we meet them is by pursuing God rather than the things of this world. A temptation is a lie that tries to trick you into thinking that the way to achieve a particular desire is to go against what God says. For Achan, maybe he had good intentions. Maybe he wanted to provide for his family, maybe he wanted to have some extra money in case someone in his community was in need. But in his actions, he showed that he didn't trust God to provide. God had been supernaturally giving the Israelites food and water for 40 years in the wilderness, yet Achan forgot all that and thought he could get away with stealing a little for himself.

Sometimes it's hard to believe it, but God does provide, and part of having faith is waiting for his timing to provide, rather than following the ways of the world. The real power to achieve our desires is found in resisting temptation, rather than giving in to them. Think of these stories. As Frodo carries the ring to Mount Doom to destroy it, all the characters are faced with the temptation to steal it and try to use its power for themselves. Yet every character in the story who gives into its power is eventually betrayed and killed by it. Frodo's real power is his

ability to resist that temptation, and it's that power that allows him to prevail. Or consider Luke as he refuses the call to join the dark side, to give in to anger. In the end, it isn't his power or strength or ability to use the force that wins the day, but his love and mercy, that turns Darth Vader to the light. It's only because these characters resisted temptation that they were able to succeed, and in the same light the more we resist temptation, the stronger we will become. Of course there will be times we fail, and we'll turn to God for forgiveness, but we still get back up and continue to fight remembering that Jesus died to forgive each and every sin. And be honest with God. Achan giving into greed wasn't even the biggest problem; it was the fact that he continued to try to hide it from God, up until the last moment. Kind of like Adam and Eve, who eat the forbidden fruit, then try to hide themselves, and later trying to shift the blame when God confronts them. Properly confessing and repenting is just as important and fighting to resist falling into temptation.

So let's not make the same mistakes as Achan. Recognize when you're facing temptation, and think about what it says about the things you desire. Maybe God has a better way of meeting those desires. Maybe there are things that are bringing extra temptations into your life that you can cut out. And spend time seeking God daily, asking that he'll continue to lead you not into temptation, but deliver you from evil.

Hi everyone! Sad I couldn't make it out to the convention this year, but I was asked to put a little video together for you guys instead. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Matt Silverman. I grew up roughly connected to the San Francisco church, but only started regularly attending church at UACC when I went down to LA for college. As I started getting plugged in to the college group and Bible studies there, I recognized that there was something different about these people, something just felt different at church. It was about a year later that I found myself at the Camp Arev college retreat, where I gave my life to Christ.

There was one verse that really transformed me that weekend, Romans 8:38-39, For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That love that was described, a love we could never lose, something that always looks out for our good. And I guess that's what the theme is this year, Bold Love. A lot of you probably know my story over the last year. It was just a year ago when I was diagnosed with a pretty serious cancer. Been a tough year, a lot of pain and difficulties, some pretty close calls where things weren't looking good, but here I am a year later still going through treatment. Actually hooked up to it right now. It was interesting timing, though, because the week I got the diagnosis was the week we were finishing up a series going through Joseph, and I was putting together a lesson on the idea that God takes things that are bad and turns them around and uses them for good. And I shared with the group, that while I knew the next season in my life was going to be one with a lot of pain and a lot of difficulties, it could also be one filled with great hope and love.

And I've seen that over the last year. God showing his love to me in strengthening me through this time. Despite the chemo that I've been going through, for the most part I've been up and around like nothing's wrong. Still going to work, still planning on going down to camp arev to help next month. I don't think it's normal for cancer patients to be this strong going through treatment, but God's been sustaining me.

It's also been amazing to see the love of the church during this time, the prayer sessions for me, the families coming by with tons of food for me and my parents. So many people have come to me to ask how they can help. And part of the love God shows us is the people he puts in our lives to help us through the hard times. I don't know what the next few years are going to hold for me, but I know God has brought me us far, and none of these circumstances will separate us from the love of God.

We wrapped up Colossians this week, and one of the things we saw was the importance of the relationships Paul had. It's important to have close, reliable friends in life, who we can count on to encourage us and give us wise counsel when we need it.

It reminds me of the story of David and Jonathan in the Bible. Before David was established as king, King Saul was the ruler of the land, and had become jealous enough of David that he was constantly looking for opportunities to kill him. Saul's son Jonathan, however, had a righteous heart, and knew that God was preparing David to be the next king. It's an amazing attitude, because in the eyes of everyone in the country, Jonathan would be the more logical person to eventually replace his father as king some day. Jonathan doesn't care about that though; he sees God's purpose, and commits himself to be David's friend during the difficult times.

Eventually David has to go into hiding to escape Saul, and he was starting to get discouraged. David is doing his best to do good, and help people, but here he has to constantly be on the run from the king he used to serve loyally. In this difficult time, Jonathan comes to visit him.

1 Samuel 23:15-18 While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this." The two of them made a covenant before the LORD. Then Jonathan went home, but David remained at Horesh.

Jonathan comes, at great personal risk. If king Saul heard that his son was visiting David to encourage him, he would have flipped out and might have tried to kill Jonathan. That did actually happen earlier. But David and Jonathan had made a promise to each other, that they would remain friends no matter what happened.

In life, we need friends like that. We need people to encourage us when we're down, to remind us of the goodness of God, to help us when the situation is too difficult for us. I can tell you, over the last year while I've had this cancer, a lot of friends have stepped up to help me during this time, bringing me food, sending encouraging messages, helping me with simple things. It was the same when I had cancer in high school, with my friends coming over to visit me and help me stay caught up in school. We need friends like that in our lives, and we need to be that kind of friend to others. And a friend doesn't just tell us the things we want to hear, but they also tell us things we need to hear. There's a proverb, Proverbs 27:6 - Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

It means that while we do encourage and strengthen each other, we also correct each other when needed. This is an important thing to remember, because our society today teaches that things like affirmation or tolerance need to be the dominant dynamic in relationships. And kindness and compassion are important, but true friends also know when they need to give you hard truths, and tell you when you're wrong. So value those friendships, and the people who are there for you with what you need. And when we go through hard times, we'll be there for each other, to help each other through it.



## CANCER SERMON 2021 DECEMBER

Well, it's been quite a year, hasn't it? A lot of twists and turns, a lot of unexpected battles. I'm not going to lie, the past year has been rough. I've been doing much better than I should be doing, but it's still been hard. A lot of days with pain, a lot of difficult nights, a lot of prayers asking God, "Man, does it really need to be cancer? Again? And does it really need to be now, when so much else is going on, with so many other challenges and difficulties? Isn't there a better time for something like this?" Of course, I guess there isn't ever a good time for cancer, but we know that God's timing for everything is always perfect. And I've seen God's hand working in the midst of this. A lot of you know, during the COVID pandemic, I had been writing those updates to help people keep up with the latest news, posting them on facebook, and somehow I attracted quite a following, I think hundreds of people started following those updates. Eventually I felt like I had covered everything worth covering, and I started praying and asking God what I should do next now that I had the attention of all these people interested in what I had to say. Then sure enough, as we were finishing up our Joseph series, and I'm putting together a video on how God takes things that were meant for evil and uses them for good, this diagnosis comes. And now all these people that I've never met in person, both Christians and non-Christians, are following me through this battle. And I've had a lot of messages and notes from people, who have been moved by watching me go through this. Saying their faith had been strengthened seeing me go through this ordeal. I've been putting short devotionals up on Facebook, putting together those YouTube videos for our group, and I've had total strangers telling me that they're enjoying them, and thanking me for making them.

How do we handle a crisis when it comes? I want us to take a little look at King Jehoshaphat, and the biggest crisis he faced in his reign. In 2 Chronicles chapter 20, three nations team up together to attack Judah; Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir. Three armies, and Judah doesn't stand a chance. They're completely outnumbered, and don't have anyone to call in for backup. So Jehoshaphat brings all the leaders of Judah together to pray to God for deliverance from this impossible situation. Listen to what God says in response:

"Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. <sup>16</sup>Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. <sup>17</sup>You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.'"

So Jehoshaphat listens, and goes out with his army into an impossible battle, and all he knows is God has promised to fight for them. And a lot of the time when we find ourselves in a crisis, that's all we have to go on. We can't win it, all we can do is trust in God. What's particularly interesting is how Jehoshaphat sets up his formation. In the front of the army, he actually puts the singers, and they're singing "Give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever."

I think there's something very significant in that. We usually don't get to choose the armies we go up against, and we usually don't get to choose the day of the battle, but we do get to choose whether or not we walk into it worshipping. Whether we put our fears first or our worship first. Jehoshaphat

decides that he's going to walk into this impossible battle with his worship in front, not knowing what God was going to do. And sometimes that's all we need to do. I've had a lot of days these past months where I really don't know what to do, so I just play some worship songs on my computer, listen to them, reflect on them, and just focus on the greatness of God in the struggle. And having just that quiet time of prayer and worship, it's powerful.

I don't think we know exactly which psalm they were singing as they went into battle, that line "Give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever" appears in a few different psalms, but it might have been something like Psalm 136, just listing off all the miracles God had performed for the Israelites in the past. Rescuing them from Egypt, defeating the enemy nations as they came to the promised land, one by one listing the miracles God had done. And we need to do the same thing in our worship, singing and reminding ourselves of all the times God has come through for us. And during this time, I've been remembering all the times God has come through for me in the past. That time when I had lymphoma, and I developed that infection, and the doctors were arguing with each other over whether I would die from the cancer or die from the infection. Times during my PhD when it looked like there was no way forward, and God somehow opened up new doors that ultimately led to a project that had huge implications for cancer diagnosis and treatment, and honestly might even apply to this cancer that I'm going through now. Something I'm looking into. Who knows, right? And those victories we had in the past, they encourage us in the battle today.

It was interesting, I was in the hospital a few days at the beginning of the semester with a little intestinal obstruction, and while I was there I got a visit from the chaplain, and I don't know what you call them, the emotional support type people, you know what I mean. Apparently they had heard about me from the doctor that had been overseeing my treatment and were really eager to meet me, I'm not sure why. And we're chatting and sharing, I'm telling them stories about my first cancer, stories about Haiti, my PhD research, we're having a good time, and at one point I say, "Look, I know I'm not immortal, we're all going to face death some day, but I am very difficult to kill." And the chaplain got a real kick out of that one, I actually read my hospital summary after my visit, to see what they were saying about me, and I was actually quoted in the notes. Even in the hospital, I was having the opportunity to share and encourage people. Sometimes it's in our greatest suffering and our most difficult battles that God gives us the best opportunities, if we're willing to take them.

And for Jehoshaphat, his battle is an opportunity too. Sure enough, God delivers on his promise. They get to the battlefield just in time to see the three armies turn against each other and wipe each other out. I can just imagine how it started. A little joking, a little pushing, some insults, some escalation, fighting breaks out, and before long these guys from different countries that might not even speak the same language are at each other's throats killing each other. There's no one left to fight. God has a way of turning evil against itself.

Now, you might ask, God if you were going to defeat those armies so quickly, why did you wait so long? Did you really have to wait for the battle to come to our front door to act? I think sometimes Christians can get into this mindset that if we're just doing the right thing, just being righteous and not sinning, that somehow we're going to be protected from the battles. That if I'm just good enough, God's going to bless me and I'll never have a crisis. The reality is I think it's more often that the opposite is true. We live in a world at war with God, and we have an enemy. Satan is always looking for a chance to bring us down, to stop the work God is doing. We need to remember that the battle can come to us at any time,



and if you aren't prepared ahead of time you're going to stumble. I think you guys know, battles are usually already decided before you even step out onto the battlefield. Our preparation comes from prayer and worship, building our relationship with God so that when the day of battle comes we have the strength to stand and fight.

I don't know why God sometimes delays. Maybe he's giving these three nations a chance to turn back peacefully, maybe he's just sparing Jehoshaphat a long hike to some place further away, but whatever the reason God waits for these armies to get within a few miles of Jerusalem before he destroys them. And the battle indeed belonged to the Lord. Victory was decided before anyone stepped out onto the battlefield.

One of the things I've noticed, is a lot of people trying to keep their battles and difficulties hidden. A lot of people in the body of Christ that want everyone else to think that everything is ok, there aren't any problems. I think it goes back to that mindset that if I'm living a good life then I won't have any problems, that if people saw the crisis that I'm going through they'd think God is punishing me. They'd think less of me if they know what I was really going through. And it's sad because when we do that, we deny ourselves the prayer support we get from those around us. Jehoshaphat doesn't go into battle alone, he brings his army, and if we want to win the battle we want to be going in with an army too. I was blown away by how many people signed up for those prayer chains for me. I think I probably have a total of a few thousand people praying for me during this time, and from the early days when I first got this diagnosis, I've had this strong conviction that this illness will not end in death, that the work isn't done yet. The more people who have told me they're praying for me, the stronger that conviction has gotten.

Actually, a couple months ago, a friend of mine from one of our other churches came up to me. He had been praying for me, and God gave him a message to give to me. I won't go into all the details of it, but he isn't the kind of guy who would just make something like this up, and one of the things he told me was that this was preparing me for some important work after this is done. Once this cancer is done with, I'll have an important assignment. Now, I'm a little worried about what this work is going to be that this cancer is what I need to prepare for it, I'm thinking "Can't there be something a little easier than this for preparation? Can't the preparation be like, just do a bunch of pushups, some weightlifting, you know, something like that?" but sometimes we just have to trust God that He's working out His purposes in us.

But that's why we need other Christians to walk along with us in the battle. We need people who have those words of encouragement, who maybe have some insight to share with us, and we also need to be people who are willing to do that sharing and encouragement for others. The hardest part of the past two years has really been how cut off everyone has been from each other. We try to make up for it with zoom and online meetings and YouTube, but I think we all know there's something much more powerful when we're able to meet face to face, and pray for each other and encourage each other. For this season in my life, it's been a reminder of what a large army I have behind me. And more than that army we can see, we know that there's an even great army of angels behind that we can't see. And sometimes our prayer is just that God would open our eyes to see that army behind us, so that we'll have confidence for the day of battle. And as difficult as I know the battles up ahead will be, I know that we have an even greater army behind us, that doesn't get tired, that doesn't retreat, and won't be

defeated. And whatever deadly dangers we face in this life, we know we serve the One who is our source of life, both here on earth and in eternity.

And for Jehoshaphat, this impossible battle was the last major crisis of his reign. After this battle, surprisingly, no one wants to fight Jehoshaphat anymore, all the nations around him decide maybe it would be best to leave this guy alone. We might not always see the full implications of the victories we win, our victories might impact people we'll never get to meet, but it doesn't change the fact that we can trust that God takes the things the enemy meant for evil and uses them for good. I probably won't know the full impact fighting through this cancer will have, but I can still have faith that good things are coming out of it. And whatever battles we have in the future, we'll march into them with that faith.

Missions trips to Haiti are always filled with adventure and excitement! I know folks are always interested in seeing pictures and hearing stories, so in case you didn't get to hear the stories I shared at church Sunday, I thought it would be fun to send out a little snap shot of the trip.

The work on these Haiti trips starts before we even leave; packing large suitcases with donations to bring with us. There were 11 of us on the team this trip, and each of us brought 2 full 50lb suitcases, one carryon, and one personal item to maximize the amount of stuff we could bring. Food, clothes, medicine, school supplies, toys...as many useful things as we can, we bring with us.



Our base of operation in Haiti is an orphanage in a small village called Fond Douze. The team has been going back to the same area for over 20 years, and have made strong connections with the people in the area and seen a lot of great transformation. The orphanage itself is a really great structure (by Haitian



standards): we usually have running water and we'll even have electricity sometimes. The compound has a gate at the bottom of the hill, which gives us a safe location to work out of. Once we get settled in, we sort through all the donations, assess the needs in the area, and start planning out our first couple of days. Normally we'd start off the first few evenings with some church services and preaching, but with so much poverty and starvation in the area due to the economic crisis, we instead focused on just feeding people for the first few days. We got big 55lb bags of rice, bags of beans, and bottles of

vegetable oil, and just went throughout the village to families we knew were in need and made sure they had some food to eat for the next few weeks. Some people couldn't even wait for us to come out to them, and we actually called them in to the orphanage to meet us there and pick up the food. While

Haiti has been completely unaffected by COVID-19, they still do not have a stable government in place from their previous elections, and I'd estimate that the majority of the population is currently unemployed. There are pretty destructive riots on a fairly regular basis, and it's become dangerous enough that almost all foreign missionaries and workers have been evacuated from the country. Even the local population is afraid to travel to



nearby cities a lot of the time, which makes it difficult to get people medical help when they need it. One of the moms in the area was very sick when we arrived; completely bedridden with a mysterious illness causing painful rashes all over, plus a serious leg injury from a motorcycle accident that left major burns on her leg. She was too scared to go to the hospital in the capitol, but we were able to get her to a hospital in a safer area that was ultimately able to diagnose her and treat her.

After a few days of bringing food to families in the area, we were able to start putting together some services. Bryan and I were the main preachers this trip, with Bryan preaching a lot on being filled and led by the Holy Spirit, while I focused on lessons we could learn from the persecutions the early Christians were facing in the book of Acts. Here Bryan and I are by the church that's located next to our



orphanage, joining them for their Sunday morning service. It was a really encouraging time, not just with us sharing some messages but also listening to the testimonies of the various members of the church. One man stood up and shared with everyone how he had recently recovered from an illness that seemed to be getting worse and worse. Medications weren't helping, his body was getting weaker, and he was losing the ability to do anything. He and his wife were very committed to prayer, however, and over the past two weeks he had recovered enough that he was able to attend church. He

had a very powerful challenge to all of us: "Don't just show up and play church. Take it seriously."

For Sunday evening, we decided to hold an outdoor service right by the orphanage building to maximize the number of people that could attend. We had a little over 100 adults outside, while half the team set up some children's ministry stuff inside for a little over 100 kids. At the end of the night, we got some plates of rice/bean/chicken dinners and fed everyone; maybe around 230 people total. When we ran out of plates of food, we just gave people some extra money so they could buy their own food later. While I knew I was preaching to a mostly Christian audience, with the sermon focused mostly on Acts 4, I found out later that we had at least some people approach members of our team after wanting to pray to accept Christ. One of the newcomers during that service, a young man named



Candee, apparently had been getting involved in some...less than good...activities, and just happened to be around when our team was out delivering food to families earlier. After some of our team members shared the gospel with him during that visit, he just started crying, and we saw him show up at every service and session we put on for the rest of the trip, and it looked like he was bringing other people with him too.

The nights were mostly peaceful in the area. Easter trips to Haiti come with the added difficulty of overlapping



with a celebration called RaRa. RaRa is essentially an anti-Easter celebration, and consists mostly of drunken crowds carousing through the streets mocking the fact that Jesus was killed. We would often hear them at night in the distance, usually around 1 or 2 am, playing loud music and generally causing a disturbance in the area. They can be dangerous if you get caught in them, but fortunately they seemed to only happen at night this time around and we were able to avoid the mobs. Interestingly, one of the guys who had been down at the RaRa came up to our team later, telling us that the next time we come he wanted to talk to us about giving his life to Jesus...which was pretty surprising. It's a reminder to us that even when it seems like someone is engaged in destructive, irresponsible behavior, God can still be working in their hearts to show them the error of their ways.

One of the special events we put on this trip was visiting a school run by a full-time missionary that has continued to live in Haiti despite the danger. The school she runs operates in the city of Leogane, which is apparently the center of the RaRa celebrations. It creates a very dangerous environment for the kids, and Elaine herself has had to move several times to stay safe, but God has been good in protecting all the kids at their school. We put together a session for them, with everyone on the team sharing some thoughts and testimonies with the kids.



I challenged the kids with the story of King Josiah, and reminded them that they should never think they are too young to do important things for God. It was encouraging to see how many kids were dedicated to pursuing a productive life, being surrounded by a culture looks down on anyone who tries to build a successful life. With so much lawlessness and criminal activity in the area, Elaine told us (almost in tears) that it felt like "Everything is permissible, except getting ahead in life." Despite that opposition, many of the kids told me they were interested in pursuing important careers like nursing and engineering, and you could see the dedication in them as I shared about my job teaching at a university.



We also made sure to set aside some time to pray for each member of the school staff. They each had such amazing hearts for serving and teaching, and had pushed through many obstacles to continue keeping the school running during such a dangerous time. We were also able to help them out financially, giving Elaine \$2000 to spend on whatever they needed to keep the school going. Operating as a tuition-free private school, they support

themselves entirely with donations, but each year God has continued to provide them with just enough to carry through to the next year. And of course in our area, we continue to support the education of

dozens of kids, not only through high school but even all the way up to a college education. We know we can't change the direction of an entire nation overnight, but the more we invest in the next generation, the greater chances we give to create a future where entire communities aren't trapped in perpetual poverty and starvation.

We invest in a lot of local businesses as well, as people try to put their lives together enough to be able to support themselves. One tragic story turned triumph was a father who lost his business after several people in his family became sick. He was running a business making charcoal, but ended up having to sell everything to cover the medical costs. Our team found him on a previous trip stuck doing low-paying day labor, earning \$3 a day. For \$440, we were able to help him get his business up again, and by the time we came on this trip he was back on his feet and able to provide for the family again. He was so grateful to our team that he offered us one of his three goats as a token of gratitude. We told him that wasn't necessary, we were happy to help.

Of course, I never pass up the opportunity to put together some fun science projects with the kids in my free time at the orphanage. This time around, we built a tiny solar powered car, a battery powered robot that would stumble around the table, and this interesting clock design that was apparently invented by Leonardo da Vinci. The boy with me here, Macken, really loves building things, and every trip is always coming up to me eager for some science gadgets to play with.



We also put together a large youth service for everyone in the area. After singing some songs and (and having an amusing little rap battle), we split up into a boys group and a girls group, and everyone on the team shared some challenges and testimonies. With the boys, I covered the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and challenged them to take their future commitments as husbands and fathers seriously. Many of them had grown up in broken families, abandoned by their fathers, and I encouraged



each of them to be the ones to break that perpetual cycle and honor the commitment of marriage. One of the guys listening who had gotten his girlfriend pregnant some time ago came up to me after and thanked me for the message, and I know he is committed to being a father that will be there for his new family. We can't prevent every bad decision from happening, but bit by bit we can challenge everyone to make better choices going forward. Then after the session, we got everyone back together and handed out sack lunches for everyone, which included a sandwich, chips, and two cookies.

And of course, it wouldn't be an Easter trip without a giant Easter egg hunt for all the kids. The Friday before we left, we got all the kids in the area together for an Easter lesson, followed by an egg hunt



outside with candy and toys for everyone. We can't actually bring enough plastic eggs for everyone, so instead most of our eggs are just paper cutouts with candy taped to the back.



After that came the really dangerous part of the trip. We had to get back into the capitol early, since we all needed a COVID test before we could get back into the US, and we decided that the best strategy to be ready for our flights on Tuesday was to head into the capitol Saturday to avoid traveling on Easter Sunday. That would allow us to get the tests on Monday without having to worry about getting stopped by an unexpected mob or riot. There was a real risk; driving out from the capitol when we first arrived, we just barely missed a major gang shootout that kicked up shortly after we left that part of the city, and now we were driving back. This time, we have the added difficulty of trying to find a safe place to stay in the capitol, preferably close to the airport so there's less chance of a riot blocking our way on Tuesday. We found a spot that was close, affordable, and supposedly safe, so we set out.

The situation got pretty intense as one of our trucks broke down at an extremely dangerous part of the city...right around where the violence had been previously. We tried to bring in another driver to take us the rest of the way, but no one we were able to contact was willing to; apparently just ahead there was some gang activity and the whole area was on edge. It ended up being pretty providential, because if the truck hadn't broken down, we might have driven right into it, and that could have gotten dangerous pretty fast.

Fortunately, the gang activity died down, we were able to find a new truck, and we were able to get in touch with some nearby friends who could take care of the truck that had broken down, so we pressed forward. We almost chose to stay at a closer hotel with more security, but we decided it would be better to honor our initial commitment to the first place we had reserved and try to stay there. And that turned out to be a huge blessing, because God wasn't done with our trip quite yet.

We got to the place safely, and it was really nice. We settled in, and Sunday we had our own Easter service; 11 of us from the US plus 7 of our young leaders in Haiti that we wanted to spend some extra time with, teaching and



training. By the time the evening rolled around, we were sitting out by the pool, each sharing some things God had been teaching us, and encouraging each other. As we were talking, I noticed the owner of the place was also out by the pool, watching us and listening to us. After we finished our session, he came up to our team leader in tears, saying that in all his years running this place he had never seen a group like ours. He could feel the presence of God in our group, and wanted to become a Christian. After praying, they exchanged contact numbers so they could stay in touch, and he told our team that from now on his place was our place; any time we were staying the capital we could use his facility. That might not seem like much, but having a safe place in the capitol that we can always count on to stay at will come in very handy in future trips, and was definitely something God set up for us.

There are so many more stories I could tell from this trip; people who accepted Christ, families we helped out of difficult situations, lives that were saved from the support we gave, but I guess I'll have to save those stories for another time. Each trip we go down with tens of thousands of dollars, and even though the work is never done we know that God continues to multiply the little loaves and fish we bring to carry out his purposes (and yes, we are very often praying that God will multiply the food as we're passing it out...and somehow we always get it to work out). And ultimately we're committed to seeing the kingdom of heaven grow in this tiny jungle village. We're committed to our friends, to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and God isn't done with His work yet. There will be difficult days ahead, and we've had some pretty painful losses, but we never forget our theme song for every trip we go on:

"Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because He lives."

Really appreciate you guys, and know that I'm always here if you ever need anything!

In Christ,

Matt

Meet the team:



Here's Winston, our team leader, giving a talk at Elaine's school. Winston is originally from Vietnam; he was 7 years old the day he had to flee Saigon during the Vietnam war as the North successfully took the city. Coming to the US as a refugee, he has a huge heart for those in need, and a great passion for seeing the gospel change lives. He continues to work as a full-time pastor and missionary, traveling all over the world to advance the gospel.

Translating for us next to him is Daniel, a young man in Fond Douze who has really been stepping up as a leader in the area. He's been a consistent presence

over the years, ever since he was a little kid, and has really made it his mission to be a light in the world around him. Our team wouldn't be able to accomplish even half of what we do without his incredible maturity, compassion, and wisdom. He maintains relationship with Christian groups all throughout the region, and is able to connect us quickly to any needs around us.





Our team's "second in command" is Mitch. He's also a full time missionary along with his wife, and brings a great deal of wisdom and experience on every trip. He has a great sense of humor, and is also a great baker. While we were getting ready for our big youth service event, Mitch was handling all our cookie baking needs, supplying us with over 200 cookies to give out as snacks after the service. A physics teacher by background, Mitch has decided to make the ministry his full time calling, and works to bring the gospel wherever the team ends up going.

Leading us in worship on the guitar here is Elisha.



She first connected with us as an undergraduate at UCLA, and has made it her mission in life to fight for humanitarian causes. Losing her father at the age of 7, she grew up alone here in California while her mother continued to work in China. Overcoming the many struggles that come with growing up without having your parents as an active part of your life, she has an incredible heart for the orphan and the poor. She currently runs an international organization that both provides economic opportunities to lift people out of poverty, as well as fund schools and education. Dozens of families in our area are able to send their kids to school because of the work she does.



Dave and Sara (married just 3 months ago) are regular leaders on all of the team's activities. Sara is one of the most experienced members on the team when it comes to Haiti, and everyone in the area of Fond Douze knows her. She is always keeping track of the needs and situations in the area, and is able to direct the rest of us to the individuals who need help. Dave, meanwhile, with his US military experience, brings the necessary muscle to the team whenever we're in a tight spot. He also has an incredible heart for prayer, and regularly meets with Christian churches he's connected to

around the world (especially in the middle east) over zoom to pray with them and encourage them. He's part of the reason the team is soon planning to expand their international missions efforts to include helping refugees in the middle east.





Dave's brother, Bryan, is one of the main preachers on any trip we go on. He has an incredible business and marketing background (I think he's currently running something like 5 different businesses), and in addition to his preaching he also helps mentor people on developing their own businesses so they can support themselves. He has huge heart for seeing people lifted out of poverty, and many families in the area are grateful for his support in helping them get to the point of financial stability.



Brian was the coleader for my Bible study group down at UCLA and one of my closest friends over the years. Although he runs his own business full time, he's been a constant presence on the team for many years, and brings his business and computer experience to help equip people for success in our area. He's experienced many tragedies in life, losing his younger brother to a motorcycle accident, followed by both parents to cancer, all within the span of a few years. This has only served to increase his passion for the gospel, however, and he makes incredible sacrifices to join the team for many of the trips we go on. When I first got to Oklahoma, he was there to greet me at the airport dressed up in a three piece suit like a chauffeur just for laughs.



Angela is our team medic on every trip. A medical lab tech by background, she's made the missions field her full time calling, and helps keep everyone in our area patched up whenever something goes wrong. You'll often see her sitting outside with her med kit as the kids line up with various cuts and scrapes and other problems. She's also instrumental in keeping our "healthy pregnancy" initiative going in the area; providing basic medical care and nutrition for pregnant and nursing moms every Tuesday. She also organizes a lot of our children's ministry activities when we're there, and makes sure none of the kids are getting left out.



Ku'uipo is one of the interns on the team, currently going through her seminary training. She connected with us as an undergraduate at UCLA, coming from a broken family background with an absent mother. Her hardships growing up have strongly motivated her to live life to the fullest, so we won't have any regrets over wasted moments. She's a constant presence on the trips, and also works closely with Elisha in running the "Haiti in the hands of Haitians" organization. With her here is SunSun, a young boy in our area with Down Syndrome. It's hard enough to have

Down Syndrome here in the US, so you can imagine how difficult it is in Haiti with other kids teasing you while adults think you are somehow cursed by God. Our team is constantly setting a loving example for everyone, however, and over the years I've noticed it having an effect on the way the kids treat him and each other. By being role models that demonstrate love and compassion to the next generation, our hope is that we'll raise up young people who have the right mindset when helping those with disabilities.



The other intern with our team is Yancy. Yancy first connected with our team as a high schooler, and has continued to stay involved with our trips throughout college and after. He leads most of the sports ministry activities, connecting with young men in the area through things like basketball and soccer. He made a big point on this trip of sharing his own struggles with the people we were ministering too, including his depression and suicide attempt when he was a teenager. Like Ku'uipo, Yancy is going through his seminary training with the goal of going into full time ministry, and joins the team in their work all around the world.



The young man translating for us here, John Mark, has really been stepping up as a leader over the years. When he was a kid, I used to give him my camera so he could run off and take pictures of the kids going crazy.



Daniel and John Mark on my very first Haiti trip back in 2008, whenever I gave them my camera to play with. They're a lot older now, but still just as crazy!

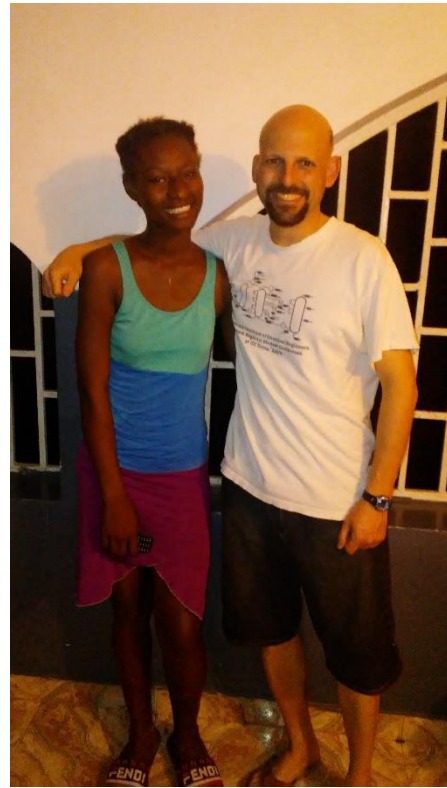




These dresses are probably a little too small for Exzam, but hopefully they'll be just the right size for his little daughter. Exzam has long been a translator for our team, and has translated for many of the sermons I've preached.



Helping Angela keep the kids under control here is SunSun, one of our most faithful leaders in the area. He's always the first one to meet us at the airport when we arrive in Haiti, to make sure we're able to navigate the chaos safely.



This is Fabienne, and apparently everyone has decided that she's somehow my daughter. Not entirely sure how I got a kid, but it's been amazing watching her grow up over the years into a faithful leader. She just turned 19, and was baptized just as we were leaving to head back to the US. She was a constant presence throughout the trip, helping the team with everything we needed. Her English is getting really good, too.

We're talking this week about being disciples, and it reminded me of a very interesting passage in John chapter 6. This is a scene that happened shortly after Jesus fed about 5000 people with just a young boy's lunch, and as Jesus starts going on his way the crowd follows him. They seem to have mixed motivations for chasing after him. Some seem to just want more food, some are thinking Jesus might be the Messiah and would do more miracles, and some are asking about what God wants them to do. In his exchanges with the crowd, he tells them that he is the living bread from heaven, and believing in him is the thing God requires.

The crowd is...confused...by the things Jesus is saying, they don't understand how Jesus can be like bread that they're supposed to eat, and they start grumbling about it. Jesus is talking about how his death will pay the price for their sins, but they don't get the message. Check out what happens instead, starting at verse 66

<sup>66</sup> From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

<sup>67</sup> "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

<sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup> We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

Imagine that. These people had seen Jesus perform miracles, they had listened to his teachings day in and day out, and in the end they decided it was just too hard to follow him. Jesus wasn't doing and saying the things the way they wanted, so they walked away from him.

Even today, you'll find people follow Jesus for different reasons. Some people do it just out of tradition; they do it because their parents did it, and their grandparents did it, and on and on. Maybe it's something just for Easter or for Christmas, maybe it's just something for their wedding day, but it never really becomes something personal to them. Others come because they're hoping for a miracle; maybe if I come, God will heal me, or bless me, or something like that. Some people come because they like hearing the nice messages about love and forgiveness and heaven, but they'll get a little upset when you start talking about our need to repent of our sins, or the dangers of hell. These people will come and go; you'll see them some times, and other times they'll have other priorities in life.

But see Jesus' interaction with his 12 core disciples here. He asks them if they want to leave too. He's not changing his message to make it easier for people to believe, he's standing firm on the truth. If they don't like the message, here's their chance to bail out. Yet Peter responds on their behalf; there's nowhere else to go, they've seen enough and heard enough to know that Jesus is the savior they've been waiting for. And at the end of the day, that's what it means to be a disciple. Even when the entire crowd is turning away, we keep following Jesus because we know he has the words of eternal life. It doesn't mean that it's always easy to follow him, and it doesn't mean we don't make mistakes...really, the disciples make a lot of mistakes, but even if there are times we stumble we get back up and keep pressing forward.

Scenes like this give us a chance to look inward, and ask ourselves whether we're following Jesus out of convenience or out of conviction that he has the words of eternal life. How would we respond if he gave us a teaching that was hard to accept? Discipleship isn't something we turn on or off at different

times, it's not an optional setting we pick whenever we feel like it; it's something that takes hold of our entire life, following the author of life. And as we grow, we find that we're leading others in discipleship as well. The more we're filled with Jesus' teaching, the more it spreads to those around us. So let's not limit the impact Jesus has on us to just one day a week, or a few days a year; let's bring Jesus into our entire lives, and watching him transform not just us, but others around us too.

We're talking about how we can use our finances in a godly way this week, and I think a nice interaction to reflect on is a scene we see in Mark chapter 10. In this passage, Jesus is approached by a rich young man, someone who seems to have an important position in the community, and he has a big question for Jesus:

<sup>17</sup> As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

<sup>18</sup> "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

<sup>20</sup> "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

<sup>21</sup> Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

<sup>22</sup> At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

<sup>24</sup> The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

<sup>26</sup> The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

<sup>27</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

This is a very famous scene, and there's a lot of interesting things going on. This man comes to Jesus knowing that there's something missing in his life. He's lived a good life by all accounts, and he seems to be very blessed. Yet something draws him to Jesus, he knows Jesus has something to offer him that he doesn't have.

What do I need to do to get into heaven, is the question he asks. At first, Jesus just talks about living righteously, and lists off a few things, but this guy knows something is still

missing. He's followed these commandments, but, he knows there's something still lacking. So, Jesus shows him his problem; at the end of the day, he's too attached to worldly things. His money is the god of his life, that's where his true worship lies. Give that up, and he'll be free to follow Jesus with his whole heart.

Now, don't misunderstand this. This is not a general command for us all to sell everything and give away all our money and walk around homeless. But it does draw our attention to something very important; our money is something we have only for this life, we can't take it with us when we die, and God blesses us with it so that we can be a blessing to others. What we own really isn't our own; we're just stewards of it. Everything we have is from God.

There's a reason we bring our offerings to church. It's not so we can have nice carpet, it's not to buy expensive furniture, it's first and foremost because we are showing that our money ultimately belongs to God first, and we are worshipping God when we give it back to him. The church, then, is using that money for a mission, not for ourselves but rather for those who are in need, for important causes and people that need our help.

We need to be careful, because we're a lot more like this rich young man in this story than we realize. If you have 20 dollars in your pocket, and food in your refrigerator, you're actually one of the wealthiest people on the planet. There are billions of people who would trade everything they have just to get that much. I've shared stories from Haiti with you guys, there's a lot of poverty and a lot of need, and people there look at us from the US like we have everything. Unbelievable riches. We may not always feel like that here, but as far as the rest of the world is concerned, we have great blessings. And with that great blessing comes great responsibility, to use what we have well, and give generously and give wisely.

So how much are we supposed to give? Like I said before, Jesus isn't giving a universal commandment here for us to all become homeless, he's showing that money mattered more to this man than the chance to actually be with Jesus and follow him. Our giving should be in that same line, reminding us not to get too attached to our possessions. The best principle I've ever heard is that we should give enough that it's a sacrifice, that we actually have to give up something we'd like, that it makes us feel just a little uncomfortable, and then, maybe give just a little bit more.

It's not an easy principle to follow, but you'd be surprised in the ways God tends to provide when we're willing to be faithful with the things He gives us. So always make sure you're setting aside something to give to God, and see how God uses what you bring for great things.





We're talking about spiritual gifts this week, and as we're thinking about it I want to take a quick look at an interesting scene in the book of Exodus. Moses has successfully led the Israelites out of Egypt, and they're getting ready to travel to the promised land. As they continue on their journey, Moses has a chance to meet up with his father in law Jethro, who starts watching how Moses leads the nation. In his observations, he notices an issue that he brings to Moses' attention in Exodus 18

<sup>13</sup> The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. <sup>14</sup> When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"

<sup>15</sup> Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. <sup>16</sup> Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and instructions."

<sup>17</sup> Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. <sup>18</sup> You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. <sup>19</sup> Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. <sup>20</sup> Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. <sup>21</sup> But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. <sup>22</sup> Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. <sup>23</sup> If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

Moses of course had an important role as leader, but there's a problem. He's doing too much. He's trying to be the judge for every single dispute or conflict that arises, and even working all day he can't get to them all. Moses was incredibly gifted by God, one of the greatest prophets and leaders in the entire Bible, but even he can't do everything.

This is an important point to reflect on as we're talking about spiritual gifts this week. A lot of the time churches think they're supposed to put all the work on the pastor; that by himself the pastor is supposed to somehow do everything the church is supposed to do. But as we saw on Sunday, we each have different gifts that we're supposed to use for God, we each have a different role to play. Part of our walk as Christians is to recognize what our gifts are, and identify the assignments God has given us. Take a look at Romans 12:3-8

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. <sup>4</sup> For just as each of us has one body with many members, and

these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Even things as simple as encouraging someone, or helping someone in need, are important roles that we can have. And we never want to be prideful, and think that our role is more important than someone else's, because we all need each other just like all the different parts of our body need each other. None of us can do everything, not even Moses. So this week, think about the different gifts God has given you. Maybe you're good at teaching others, maybe you're good at encouraging someone who's going through a rough time, or maybe you're able to give to someone in need. Whatever your gifts are, pray that God would show you the opportunities you have to use them for good. And together we'll build each other up to be stronger than any of us would be alone.

CACC Bible Study  
***Godly Living in a Hostile World***  
Daniel 5

1. Have you been praying for the names you wrote down at the end of the last study?      Daily?      2-3x?      Once?
  - a. What will help you to be more consistent?
  
2. Do you know of people or have encountered a specific person who has not only rejected the gospel, but has ridiculed followers of Jesus?
  
3. How would you describe the party king Belshazzar threw for his gods in 5:1-4?
  
4. Have you ever envied sinners when they have been portrayed as having a lot of fun, even when sinning? Be honest! Describe a time when that was true for you.
  
5. What caused the king to turn pale and weak in the middle of his revelry (5:5-6)? And why was this so disturbing to the king considering his attitude towards God?
  - a. Have you seen anything like this when someone mocking God got a wake up call? (see Acts 12:20-23)
  
6. What keeps you or Christians in general from participating at such events?
  
7. Why should the king have known better? See 5:10-12, 18-22

8. Of what sins did Daniel accuse the king (23)?

- a. According to the pastor's explanation, what do these gold and silver goblets from the Jerusalem temple symbolize?
- b. In what way do we tend to take God's holiness or representations of His grace lightly? What do you think of the examples the pastor gave and why?
- c. What other examples can you give?

9. If God were to weigh you and measure you (5:26-28), what would He say to you? Where would He say you're falling short in taking His holiness and His symbols of grace lightly?

**Proverbs 22:24-25** <sup>24</sup> Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, <sup>25</sup> lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare.

We're talking about managing our emotions this week, and I think this proverb is particularly relevant to the culture we see around us today. More and more I see people, whether it's on the TV, on the news, or on the internet, or even out in the streets, giving into just pure anger and hatred. They can't say a kind word to the people they disagree with; they have to fight. The greater the emotional outburst, the more attention they get. Not only do they have to fight, they insist that you fight with them, even if what they're fighting over doesn't really matter. That's why I think this proverb is so important for us today, because it's very true that anger is contagious and will draw you in if you aren't guarding against it.

And we should clarify here, because there is such a thing as righteous anger. We see in the Bible, God has a righteous anger when He sees evil, and we'll feel that kind of anger as well. When we see evil going unpunished, when we see suffering and tragedy, in our hearts we can feel an anger, and a strong desire to do what is right. But that anger needs to be guided by wisdom, because if we just act on emotion alone we're going to find that we almost always do more harm than good.

Unfortunately, acting on emotion alone seems to be pretty popular in our culture today. Like we talked about on Sunday, we can see it in movies like *Inside Out*, where we have a character, Riley, who's completely controlled by her emotions. The emotions are pictured as being in some control room, and they get to dictate how Riley responds to situations. And anger is there, of course, ready to catch on fire and break things.

Proverbs 29:11 - A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.

We're surrounded by a culture that wants to pretend that our feelings are "always right" or they're our "personal truth" or something like that. Of course we know that isn't true. How many times have you reacted to something, and then sometime later realized that maybe you overreacted, or maybe your reaction wasn't based on accurate information. And you know what, we learn from those mistakes, we gain wisdom, so in the future we're able to respond in a better way. It's ok to admit that we made a mistake in how we reacted to something, because we're all going to do it from time to time. We just treat it as a learning experience, and apologize when we need to.

So what can we do to reduce the chance of responding to a situation with too much anger? First thing is it's good to have a few trusted people you can confide in, people you know will give you honest feedback on whether your response to a situation is correct, and not just tell you what you want to hear. Recognize when your emotions are starting to take hold of you, and try to distance yourself from the problem until you can talk through it with someone who can give you a more balanced view of the situation.

Above all else, remember that God is still in control, even in our worst situations. He hasn't forgotten us, and He isn't ignoring us. Sometimes just reminding ourselves of that is enough to give us peace to last us through the crisis. And don't forget that emotions are good, God created us with them. They each have a proper role to play in our lives, even anger and sorrow, but wisdom helps us use them in the right way.

My son, do not forget my teaching,  
but keep my commands in your heart,  
<sup>2</sup> for they will prolong your life many years  
and bring you peace and prosperity.  
<sup>3</sup> Let love and faithfulness never leave you;  
bind them around your neck,  
write them on the tablet of your heart.  
<sup>4</sup> Then you will win favor and a good name  
in the sight of God and man.  
<sup>5</sup> Trust in the LORD with all your heart  
and lean not on your own understanding;  
<sup>6</sup> in all your ways submit to him,  
and he will make your paths straight.<sup>[a]</sup>  
<sup>7</sup> Do not be wise in your own eyes;  
fear the LORD and shun evil.  
<sup>8</sup> This will bring health to your body  
and nourishment to your bones.

John 14: <sup>25</sup> "All this I have spoken while still with you. <sup>26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. <sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

What happens when you put an eight-year-old in charge of a country? For anyone who's been a parent of an 8-year-old, that's probably a terrifying thought. In our minds, we have some qualifications, of what it takes to be the leader of an entire nation. But, sometimes God likes to throw us a little curve ball, in terms of who he sets up to be a ruler. Last month when I preached, I shared how I have a lot of interest in studying how the different kings of the Bible act from one generation to the next. What causes a generation to turn out differently? And last time I shared a pretty sad story, of Jehoshaphat's son who just completely turned away from God, and sent the nation into a downward spiral. Today though, I want to pick up where I left off, and look at a king who took things in the opposite direction.

2 Chronicles 34: 1-7 Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. **2** He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.

**3** In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols. **4** Under his direction the altars of the Baals were torn down; he cut to pieces the incense altars that were above them, and smashed the Asherah poles and the idols. These he broke to pieces and scattered over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. **5** He burned the bones of the priests on their altars, and so he purged Judah and Jerusalem. **6** In the towns of Manasseh, Ephraim and Simeon, as far as Naphtali, and in the ruins around them, **7** he tore down the altars and the Asherah poles and crushed the idols to powder and cut to pieces all the incense altars throughout Israel. Then he went back to Jerusalem.

So, Josiah, 8 years old, and he becomes king. His father, Amon, was pretty evil, and only lasted 2 years before he got himself assassinated, pushing Josiah into the roll at a very young age. And as Josiah becomes king, we wonder, will he just take after his father, as so many sons do? Will he keep doing the evil things his father was doing?

Yet, something in Josiah clicks. He recognizes at this young age that he didn't want to follow in the footsteps of a king who only survived for two years, even though this was his father. Even at the age of 8, Josiah understands that there has to be a better path. Then, at the age of 16, he finds this better path, following God. I know, a lot of the time, people look at teenagers, and they say, ah, teenagers, they can't make good choices. They're immature, they're self centered, rebellious...they're...

Josiah shows us something though. Don't write off then next generation just because they're young. A young person empowered by God can do extraordinary things. Josiah turns out to be one of the best kings that the Israelites ever have. On par with kings like Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah, and even king David. And he makes it his mission to restore proper worship of God in the land.



**2 Chronicles 34:8** - In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, to purify the land and the temple, he sent Shaphan son of Azaliah and Maaseiah the ruler of the city, with Joah son of Joahaz, the recorder, to repair the temple of the LORD his God.

Josiah realizes it's not enough to just get rid of the idols and false gods that had infiltrated the country, he needs to replace them with a proper place to worship, and sets out to rebuild the temple. And an interesting thing happens when he does this. You see, after over 5 decades of neglecting proper worship, things had gotten so bad that not only had the temple fallen apart, but people had literally lost God's law. The Bible. They just, lost their last copy. You think of countries where it's illegal to have a Bible, where governments do anything they can to find copies of the bible and destroy them. The Israelites had been turned away from God for so long that this new generation didn't know anything about it.

Until, they start repairing the temple. As they start brushing the dust off the old items inside, lo and behold, they find this interesting scroll.

**2 Chronicles 34:14-18** While they were bringing out the money that had been taken into the temple of the LORD, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the LORD that had been given through Moses. <sup>15</sup> Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD." He gave it to Shaphan.

<sup>16</sup> Then Shaphan took the book to the king and reported to him: "Your officials are doing everything that has been committed to them. <sup>17</sup> They have paid out the money that was in the temple of the LORD and have entrusted it to the supervisors and workers." <sup>18</sup> Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.

I just, try to imagine that scene. They're cleaning things up, and look, and say, well this is funny, what's this? They come to the king, Hey, we're doing all the work, but, we found something, we're not quite sure what it is. Our translations say book, but back then it would have probably been written on a scroll. And as Josiah listens to the words of God's law being read, he realizes, **they're in trouble**. He might have been reading **Deuteronomy 31:17-18**, where God describes what will happen in the future when His people turn away from Him:

And in that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and calamities will come on them, and in that day they will ask, 'Have not these disasters come on us because our God is not with us?' <sup>18</sup> And I will certainly hide my face in that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods.

Or he might have been reading the **prophetic song Moses** records in chapter 32, when he describes the events that will take place in that time in the future. Josiah realizes that the nation has been worshipping other gods for so long, that they're getting pretty close to seeing this time of **judgement and destruction**. And Josiah says, ok, maybe that day of judgement and wrath will come in the future, but it won't be on my watch. Rather than giving up and throwing

in the towel, **Josiah decides to double down**, and **empower a generation** to seek after God with their whole hearts. And I can say this, after years of ministry, after years of teaching children and teenagers and college students, **don't underestimate** a young person empowered by the Bible.

That word, empowered, it's a popular word nowadays. It gets thrown around a lot. Politicians, celebrities, they want to empower people. Pops up in their speeches a lot, doesn't it? I was curious, I looked it up in **Merriam-Webster**, to see what the actual definition was. "To give official authority or legal power to" "Enable" "to promote the self-actualization or influence of" Me, I tend to like the definition of, **giving someone** the ability to do something they otherwise wouldn't be able to do. Ideally, the ability to do something good or beneficial. Setting someone free from something that holds them captive, or in slavery.

**John 8:31-34**<sup>31</sup> To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. <sup>32</sup> Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

<sup>33</sup> They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

<sup>34</sup> Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

**It's interesting**, sin often comes in under the guise of empowering you. **Take this fruit**, you will be like God. **Just cheat** this one time, it will put you in a better position in the future. **Just tell** a little lie, spread a little gossip about that person, maybe you can get that promotion, make a better salary. **Hey, God is love, right?** God wants you to be happy, love is love, get into any relationship you want. Why limit intimacy to just one person when there are so many other options out there?

**I often tell people** that a temptation is a lie that tells you that the way to satisfy a desire you have is to go against God's will. And once you fall for that lie, once you give in to temptation, it traps you, makes you a slave. And I think that's something that Christians have forgotten over the centuries. **We're not here** to make people follow rules, or **stop having fun**, or say **funny** sentences in old English, **we're here** to set the captives free. To empower people, by giving them the truth that exposes the lies that lead to death. People today have forgotten, the Bible isn't just old fairy tales and wishful thinking; it's the word that was given to us to help us navigate the maze of lies the world throws at us. And Josiah shows us, that even if you give that to a kid, they can make something out of it.

And this, this is more important now than ever. The sheer volume and range of lies that the next generation is being bombarded with, between the internet, social media, schools, the entertainment industry, really is beyond anything we've ever seen before. **We saw that** definition of empower, and that third definition had that little note about "self actualization" Just find your true self. That's a huge message today, isn't it? "You need to find your truth, no one else can tell you who you are or what's right for you" In the era of moral relativity, the only

thing that's **wrong** is the act of telling someone else they're wrong, unless...**you're** telling them that telling someone else they're wrong is wrong, in which case it's right, unless it's wrong...but only on **Wednesday** and some **holidays**, unless it's the **supreme court**, but only if he's a white male, unless **he's a she**, but also a **liberal**, but not if she's a black **female conservative**....I...

**Man moral** relativism gets confusing when you try to figure it out.

This is not new, **back during Josiah's time**, their version of moral relativism was essentially theological relativism. You can have your god, I can have my god, both our gods can be real, even if they're contradictory...and even if they're just a random carving I made out of wood.

So first thing Josiah does, gets everyone together and **just reads the Bible**. The elders, the priests, even just ordinary people, he brings them together and says, "Guys, look, we've found the word of God that He gave to our ancestors long ago, we've forgotten about it until now, but we're in trouble, so it's time to get serious. And they read it, and they make a covenant together, they are going to follow this God. The God that brought them out of Egypt. The God who parted the Red Sea. The God who has rescued them time and time again.

**When we're** talking about empowerment, that's the first thing we need. We need the words of God. We have it right here. And we don't have it so we can put it on display, or frame verses on the wall. We have it so we can internalize it, meditate on it. Be filled with it daily as we read. It's why we need to have regular reading time, or devotionals, and use them to build on the foundation of our faith.

And we need to read it properly. I was talking with people just this week about this. A lot of people tend to turn to the Bible or to devotionals just when they're in trouble, or seeking something. They want God to speak just the right thing they need to hear, at just the right moment. And sure, sometimes God does that, we get just the verse we need just when we need it. It's happened to me, I'll admit it. But we start getting to the point where we're trying to use the Bible like it's a fortune cookie or something. Like it's tarot cards or a magic 8 ball. God, should I major in chemical engineering or interpretive dance theory?

And...2 Samuel 6:14 – "And David danced before the Lord with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod"

Guys, I'm supposed to major in interpretive dance theory. Praise the Lord, He has revealed His will to me. Uh, I'm not sure if that's really a good, No no, God spoke to me, He showed me in the Bible, and I'm supposed to wear linen clothing today also. It was in my daily devotional.

Of course that's not how we're supposed to use the Bible. It's not a divining rod, it's truth that's given to us in order for us to establish a theological foundation that we can make wise and more decisions from. And more important than having that timely word that comes right when we need it, it's better to have that word before we need it, so that when the crisis comes we have a solid foundation to stand on and navigate with. And I think you guys know, it doesn't matter how wealthy you are, how physically fit you are, how smart you, the day of crisis will

come. The battle comes, the enemy is at the door, and if you aren't dressed and ready for it, it's going to be a tough day. Yeah, the victory belongs to the Lord, and He'll see us through it, but it's much better if you're awake and ready the day the enemy comes knocking.

**Ephesians 6:11** – Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

So have Bible verses memorized and ready to go. Keep your prayer life strong, and your connection to God firm. Not because you want God to tell you what job to take or who you should marry, but so that we have the ability to make wise and moral decisions. And on that path, sure, maybe God will throw you a curveball, give you a little more specifics on what you need to do as you pray, put you in a unique situation that requires supernatural revelation. There are times in the Bible when God speaks to people, and tells them exactly what they need to do. But most of the time, people are just, making decisions with the wisdom and information they have, sometimes rebelling against God and sometimes obeying. So we need the Bible to establish our theological foundation, to help navigate the lies our society tells us.

**What are the big things today?**

I talked about the problem of moral relativism. The problem is, when you don't have an objective moral standard to use as your basis for discussion and passing laws, all you have is endless conflict and anger. People say we're more polarized in our society politically than ever before. Why? We can't agree on right and wrong, so we can't have a real discussion on it. People have been flipping out for weeks over the Roe V Wade decision. Why? Because people don't have real discussions on why human life had inherent value, or at what stage in our development we have that inherent right to life. Instead, they replace right and wrong with beneficial or detrimental. I remember at UCLA once, I saw a Christian debating with an atheist about the concept of objective morality. The Christian said "what would be wrong with me stealing money from you right now" And the atheist says, well, that would be right for you, but wrong for me. But really, all he was doing was swapping the definitions of the words. What he meant was detrimental. It would be bad for me because I would have less money. And in a world where life doesn't have inherent value, all that matters is who is strongest to take what they want.

Years ago, there was a great story a pastor shared on his blog. He was talking about morality with a girl who thought he was this bad, misogynistic guy because he was a conservative Christian. And as they're discussing, he asks her to explain why it's wrong for a man to beat and abuse his wife. And she struggles to come up with an answer, because she believes that morality is relative, so after she fumbles around with words all she can say is, "Well, I personally don't like it." And the pastor responds, well, I can say, without a shadow of a doubt, that because that wife is created in the image of God and has inherent value, it's evil for her husband to hurt her, that spouses have an inherent, God given obligation to love and care for each other, and the abusive husband will face God's judgement for his evil ways. And he stops and says, I can say that without any uncertainty, but the best you can do is just say, I personally

don't like it. But I'm the misogynist? And the girl didn't have any response to that, just a little tear that came down her cheek. Why did she cry? Because she suddenly found herself face to face with a worldview that ascribed inherent worth to her, a human created in God's image. A human Jesus died for. That'll shake anyone's world.

I remember another evangelist, goes around, records videos of himself giving the gospel with people, sharing a video of a discussion he had with young woman about why she supported abortion. In this video, he's asking her, and she says, well, what if the baby would have had a terrible life, maybe suffer abuse, maybe be neglected. The evangelist looks at her, and asks her, hey, have you suffered some abuse. And she's quiet, little tear comes down her cheek, she just nods a little. He asks her, are you feeling depressed, maybe thinking about suicide? A few more tears, and a little nod. Hey, can I pray with you right now? At that point the video stops, because that's when you need to focus on ministering to the person in need, but what's happening in these stories? These girls are realizing, maybe for the first time, that they are truly loved by a God who knows them fully, and values them as true daughters.

I was sharing a few years ago at camp Arev about love, and one of the nights I share the verse Isaiah 49:15 Where God Says- "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" One of the high schoolers at camp that week was adopted, and had been struggling with the emotions and questions of whether or not he was really loved, the feeling like he had been rejected by his biological family. And one of the counselors who knew this immediately went over to him with this verse and gave it to him. And this boy, for all the tough guy front he put up in front of everyone, came up to me afterwards, telling me that he just read that verse over and over again, crying, as he came face to face with this God who would never forget or reject him. That's power right there.

More than anything, our generation needs to find our inherent worth from God, rather than the things society tries to sell us. Flooded with social media, our young people today, especially our girls, are told that their **inherent** worth comes from their outer appearance, how they look in front of the camera. They're given completely unrealistic images of what beauty is supposed to be. **Look at these pictures**, it's all photo shopped, see the before and after. The pictures on the magazines, the pictures that show up on Instagram and in movie adds, none of it is real. **Look at this**, this is one of the Kardashian people. Photoshop, changes the angle of her head, makes her much thinner, changes the color of the dress, even changes the color of the baby. Why? Lose 10 pounds in 10 days. All of this, the goal is to tell you that you aren't good enough the way you are, but buy our product, and then you'll be happy.

**1 Peter 3:3-4** Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. <sup>4</sup> Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

Why, why does Peter say this. Because **Proverbs 31:30**- Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting. Because God knows that chasing after beauty, chasing after our outer image, it's a trap that will make us a slave. \$1000s of dollars in beauty products, countless hours trying to cover up every imperfection. Maybe for boys, it's more common for them to be told that their worth is in their physical strength, or in their occupation, or how much wealth they can accumulate. And maybe for that we would turn to **Jeremiah 9:23-24** This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD.

Beauty, strength, wealth, power, none of it matters, it's all a chasing after the wind. But unless we arm our kids to recognize this trap, they'll be fighting in a war without a weapon.

One thing that people have noticed in this generation, is a shift in what young people aspire to. In the past you ask a kid what they want to be when they grow up, they say "Doctor, astronaut, president", things like that. Today? Pretty common to hear kids want to be social media stars. They want to be "**influencers**" They want to influence other people. That's part of what our society tells us is empowerment. When we get influence over other people. But you look at the lives of these so called influencers, and behind the scenes they're just so sad, and depressed, always worried about what others are thinking about them. The reality is they aren't really influencing anyone, they're just stuck in the trap of people pleasing, just giving their fans what they want to see. Then they get sponsors and advertisers, and all they're doing is just parroting out the ideologies they're being fed. They aren't the ones who are the real influencers, they're just being manipulated as tools for others. So much for empowerment, right? You look at celebrities in the entertainment industry, these women giving performances in revealing and provocative outfits, just last month supposedly for Pride month, performing ridiculous...well, we won't go there...then turning around saying they're empowering women by encouraging them to do the same. That's not empowering, that's degrading. Maybe it feels great at first, they get their cheers and their attention, but you all know how it ends.

Ok, I know I'm out of time here and going over, but I really want **to zero in** on this one last point, so stay with me just for one more minute. We are all influenced by things, and in turn we influence others. The things we fill ourselves up with are going to be what overflows from us and impact other people. Josiah realized that he needed to get rid of the influence that was coming from all these false idols and fill people up with the influence that came from scripture. That's real empowerment. And yeah, after Josiah was gone, eventually the day of God's judgement came as the nation again turned away again, but his work wasn't in vain. He gave not only his generation the power of the Bible, but us today as well. Without the faith of this young child, we wouldn't have this today. And when we're empowered by this word, when we empower others with it, it's not in vain either. So let this be our influence and empowerment, and let's use that power to do great things.

Proverbs 27:3 Stone is heavy and sand a burden, but a fool's provocation is heavier than both.

The world record for heavy weight lifting is currently held by Lasha Talakhaze, setting the record in the Tokyo Olympics with his competition lifts totaling 1073.6 pounds. It is a tremendous strain to carry such a burden...and requires an intense amount of training. You can't just wake up one day and lift hundreds of pounds; you have to prepare.

The proverb shows us that of all the heavy things we could possibly try to carry, provocation from a fool weighs even heavier on us. Insults, slander, foolish statements, every ridiculous thing they could possibly say, it weighs on us, angers us, and we just have to respond. Those words can impact us long after they're spoken, and if we're not careful they can really derail us. We can get angry, make a rash decision, and before you know it you're the one starting to act like a fool.

In the same way a weightlifter needs to train to carry a heavy load, we need to train our own hearts and minds to be able to withstand the burden that can come from foolish provocation. So how do we do that?

Take a look at Proverbs 22:1 A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

This is something that we all intuitively know, our reputation is important, we want other people to respect us. When we face foolish provocation, there can be a part of us that feels like our reputation is being attacked, that others will think less of us because of the words the fool has spoken. We're afraid of shame. But remember what we were talking about earlier? The source of shame is pride, and true humility is the cure. When we have the right attitude of humility, when we're focused on how God sees us, rather than how other people see us, we're able to resist the burden of provocation. God doesn't listen to fools, and He knows the truth about us, both the good and the bad.

Proverbs 18:7 – A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.

Often we don't need to do a lot to respond to a fool. Eventually they're going to ruin themselves with their words, and they'll turn people against themselves. It may take time, but when we're trusting in God we can have the patience to wait for fool's end to come.

Now, sometimes it's right to respond to someone's false statements. Take a look here at Proverbs 9:7-9 Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.

One of the things we need to ask ourselves when someone says something we know is wrong is how this person will respond to our corrections. If they're someone who doesn't care about truth, if they don't care about doing right; you're probably wasting your time. You can try, but



they're probably going to get upset with you as a result. I've had that happen to me a lot over the years, even during this pandemic as I've tried to provide accurate medical information to people who really didn't want to hear it, and over time you learn to recognize who we should spend more of our time investing in. The fools and the scoffers, you can try a little bit, but when they start getting hostile you just accept that they won't listen and walk away. Instead, focus on the people who want to learn and grow, and pray that over time the hearts of those who are foolish will be more receptive to correction.

Now take a look at proverbs 27:6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

Not every comment that makes you upset is necessarily bad. When someone says something that upsets us, one of the things we should ask ourselves is if this person is someone who is looking out for our good. Their words might hurt in the moment, but they also might save us from a greater pain later down the road. Meanwhile, watch out for someone who never tells you anything you don't want to hear. They'll flatter you, tell you to overlook your faults, and before long you'll find your pride and your ego start tripping you up. Don't let your heart be burdened by a fool's provocation, but also be willing to receive criticism from the people who care about you.

And just like being a weightlifter, this takes intentional training. We need to be intentional about preparing our hearts and minds to resist insults while also being open to receiving criticism. It's hard work, but the end result is a life that can avoid a lot of unnecessary conflicts and problems by standing firm on what is right.



## Devotional 1 – False Witness

Read Proverbs 19:5 and 19:9

A false accusation...a lie. It can destroy an entire life in an instant. It can often leave us feeling bitter, being punished for something we didn't do. I'm sure Joseph was tempted to feel that way; to trap himself in self-pity as he sat in jail for a crime he never committed. These proverbs reminds us, however, that the ultimate Judge is God, and He won't be tricked by lies and false accusations. He knows the truth, and will bring everyone into account for every lie they tell.

We are never told what happened to the woman who accused Joseph of attacking her...she never appears in the story again. I have to imagine she found herself in an awkward situation when Joseph was eventually put in charge of the entire country, although Joseph doesn't seem like the kind of guy to seek revenge. Maybe just the knowledge that the guy she tried to destroy was now the most powerful person in the land was enough to keep her humble from that point forward. Either way, we need to remind ourselves that it isn't our job to get even; God will vindicate us, we just need to trust and be faithful.

## Devotional 2 – Favor

Read Proverbs 16:7

Despite his setbacks in life, Joseph always finds favor wherever he goes. As a slave in Potiphar's house, he was eventually put in charge of the whole household. When he lands in prison, he actually gets put in charge of the prison. These seem like bad situations, with people who are in positions to mistreat Joseph however they want, but God rewards Joseph's faithfulness by giving him peaceful relationships with those in power.

The same is sometimes true for us. I remember I was often warned while doing my PhD at UCLA that I wouldn't be able to succeed if I kept making God the priority in my life...my research supervisors wouldn't put up with it. Yet I found that even as I faced setback after setback, God always gave me favor with a few people that allowed me to continue working. In the end, I completed the PhD working on a project that I loved, and contributed to work that will hopefully save lives one day when the work comes to fruition. God doesn't guarantee that He will always give us peace with our enemies, but don't be surprised if it happens now and then.

Prayer Topics:

God, give me the patience to endure persecutions and false accusations.

God, give me the strength to resist the temptation to sin.

God, give me favor with those I work with, so that I can enjoy peaceful time.

God, help me see the purpose and work you have called me to.

## Genesis 39 and 40

### The Story of Joseph Continues



What's Love Got To do with it?

Proverbs 20:6 - Many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful person who can find?

We're looking at the life of Joseph, and this week we've seen a very interesting story. We see him rise up to an important position in his new home, only to have the wife of his master accuse him of attacking her, and Joseph ends up in prison. She's mad at him because he wasn't willing to have an affair with her; she wanted to sleep with him, and he says no way, it wouldn't be right.

Genesis 39 offers us a very powerful challenge when dealing with the temptations of sexual sin. It's particularly important for us to reflect on now, given that our society is increasingly disregarding the importance of faithfulness in marriage. You'll often hear the notion of "Hey, if it makes you happy, do it." Why should anyone have the right to tell you not to do something fun. Hey, you don't have to tell anyone, just keep it a secret, no one will know you're being unfaithful.

But Joseph knows something; he knows he has a higher responsibility than just doing whatever feels good. What's really fascinating, is when you stop to think about it, Joseph had every reason to give up on honoring the sanctity of marriage and family. His own dad had children with four different women, two of which he wasn't even married to. Joseph's own family, his own brothers, were the ones to betray him, and sell him into slavery, but he decides to not let this pattern of broken families define him. He's going to live his life defined by real love.

That's why I appreciate about this proverb. You will encounter many people in life who will tell you they love you. Especially in this culture, because for the most part our current culture doesn't really understand what love is. You'll often see signs proclaiming "Love is love" around, but what those signs are celebrating usually isn't love...usually that saying is in the context of, "have sex with whoever you want, doesn't matter whether you're being faithful or not" Doesn't matter if you're being holy, or honoring God.

We live in a society that wants to equate chasing after sex with chasing after love, But that's not true. What they're really doing is chasing after pleasure. A temporary, shallow pleasure, and once it's done, they'll discard the person and move on to the next person. Many claim to have unfailing love, but often, all they're looking for is self-satisfying pleasure.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 tells us what love is. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Love is not the person who says they want to have sex with you. Love is the mother who is changing a dirty diaper at 3 in the morning, tired and exhausted, while her baby is crying. Love is a father who grabs his son as he reaches for something dangerous, and holds him back from hurting himself. Love is the mother, who still feeds you dinner after you've spent the day yelling

at her, and tucks you into bed kissing you, telling you she forgives you. Love is the husband who refuses the advances of another woman, because he's committed to staying faithful to his wife. Love is Jesus, dying for us while we were still sinners. Many claim to have unfailing love, but man oh man, where are we going to find someone who has love like that. A faithful man, a faithful woman, where in the world are we going to find someone like that?

The story of Joseph reminds us that we can say no to sexual temptations, and wait for God to bring the right person into our lives in the right timing; someone who will be faithful to us. And it starts with us challenging ourselves to be that faithful person, who honors family and marriage, because we know that by doing that we're honoring God. But this story also reminds us that we will face hardships as a result of that. Joseph does the right thing, but he's still thrown into prison. He doesn't let that discourage him, however, and he realizes this setback is really just a setup for getting him where he needs to be to save the nation. But we'll, save that story for next week.

So here's my challenge to you. God created families for a reason. There's a reason we are created male and female. There's a reason God gave us a family structure, husbands and wives, fathers, mothers, and children. And we're living in a society that increasingly wants to throw all that out, and will mock and insult us for living lives that honor God's design. But if we're willing to resist the culture, if we're willing to stay faithful like Joseph did, in spite of the opposition, God will be with us and see us through. Take a page out of Joseph's playbook, and if sexual temptation comes your way, just bolt, run out the door, and don't look back. And meanwhile be patient and gentle and loving with those who mock you, insult you, and accuse you of things you didn't do, in the hopes that you can win them over to the truth. We'll love other people, just as Jesus loved us, and died for our sins. Because that is the ultimate love.

## Devotional 1 - Skilled

### Read Proverbs 22:29

Joseph is found to be responsible with everything he's left in charge of. Whether a servant in a home or a prisoner in a cage, he always seems to be so successful with his responsibilities that's he's given even more opportunities by the people in charge. It would have been easy for Joseph to make the excuse to only do his job halfway; up to this point he's really been the victim in every part of this story. Yet he demonstrates his skill and work ethic, and is eventually recognized by the king of the nation.

While we don't all get a chance to work for the king of a country, you will find more often than not that hard work and integrity is met with great reward, and even better opportunities. We too should try to be responsible with the tasks given to us, even if they seem minor and insignificant. Being responsible with the little things, whether it's chores around the house or simple homework assignments, trains us to be responsible with the big things. As you grow, look for opportunities to take on greater tasks when you're ready, and see what doors God opens for you.

## Devotional 2 - Nourishing

### Read Proverbs 10:21

After much anticipation and many challenges, Joseph is finally brought into the position God has been preparing him for. Joseph has an important assignment...one that affects not only his own family, but all the surrounding nations. Joseph is put in charge of preparing the nation of Egypt for the upcoming famine, and because of his work all the surrounding nations are able to come to Egypt to get the necessary food to last the 7 years of famine.

Often people seek positions of power for the sake of power itself. People want fame, wealth, and recognition. God calls us, however, to use our gifts for the sake of others. If God puts you in an important position, or gives you great knowledge or wisdom, He's also giving you the responsibility to use it wisely. We should make it our goal to nourish and support others, both physically but also spiritually. Our words are powerful, and can change the course of a life for better or worse. Each day, look for ways to build others up, whether through your words or your actions, and God will use you to save lives.

## Prayer Topics

God's spirit to comfort those who are sick or suffering during this time

God would show you the work He is preparing you to accomplish

God would give you endurance to stay faithful during difficult times

Opportunities to bring hope and healing to others in need

# Joseph Part 3 - In the presence of the king Genesis 41



Proverbs 17:3 says The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.

The process of refining precious metals like gold and silver is pretty intense. You need a lot of heat to melt the metal down. Different metals melt at different temperatures, so with enough work and just the right temperatures you're able to get very pure metal by removing the impurities. The end result is something much more valuable than what you started with. It's valuable because of its purity.

In this proverb, God is comparing the refining of gold and silver to the refining of our hearts. In the same way it takes a lot of work to get pure silver and gold, God is going to do a lot of work in us to make our hearts pure. But the process is difficult, isn't it? Refining something is usually a pretty intense process, and often involves breaking something down and reforming it over and over again, each time removing a little of the impurities. The same thing is true in our lives. The process of refining our hearts, making them more pure, is usually pretty difficult. As much as we like the seasons in our lives when things are easy and comfortable, it's usually the difficult challenges we face that cause us to grow the most. The painful times, the days where it seems like the burdens are just too great. Look at what Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:3-9

<sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. <sup>7</sup> These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup> Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup> for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter reminds us that our faith is refined by the trials we go through in life, and the end result is salvation and joy, something that lasts much longer than gold.

You'll meet a lot of people in life who use their hardships as an excuse to just give up...they lose hope. Maybe that will happen to us sometimes too. I'm sure there were days Joseph was tempted to give up while he was in prison. How is he supposed to rise up to the important position God had promised to him if he's sitting behind bars? When we're tempted to give up, when we're losing hope, it's important to have other people around us to encourage us, and remind us that these difficulties are building something important in us. They're preparing us for a great work, and a universal rule you'll find true everywhere is that the greater the work you're preparing for, the tougher it is to prepare. And Joseph, he's saving a whole nation, a bunch of nations actually, and after he's been through the trials and difficulties he's finally ready to be put in charge. His faith, his wisdom, his hope, his compassion, they're all built and it's time to start the work he was created to do.

In my own life, I've had many setbacks. I've faced a lot of sickness, from cancer and other problems. I've faced a lot of struggles in school, especially while finishing my PhD. But as I've shared with each of you before, each of those struggles taught me something, equipped me with something, brought me closer to God as I sought God's help to go through them. And often, they showed me things in my life that were holding me back; impurities that I needed to remove.

And you know what, I'm going to face more difficulties in the future, and those will help refine my faith as well. I don't know what work God is preparing me to do in the future, I doubt it's saving a country from a famine, but hey, you never know right? So while we wait, let's trust that God is refining our hearts through the hard times, removing the impurities, and transforming us more into the person we were created to become. Remember, God has created you with a purpose. He knows your name, he knows what your struggles are, and his promise to those of us who have put our trust in him is that he will see us through to the end, and give us a reward greater than anything gold or silver could buy. Let's pray, that God's fire will continue to refine our hearts.

## Devotional 1 – Avoiding Evil

### Read Proverbs 16:6

Joseph's brothers have committed a horrible sin against him...one they would never be able to make up for. What kind of price can you pay for selling your own brother into slavery? I find it interesting in the story of Joseph that he seems to know this; he has no expectation that his brothers are ever going to be able to right the wrong they committed. Instead, in this test he's giving them, he's looking for their love and faithfulness. Have their hearts changed?

He's also looking to see if they are starting to acknowledge their guilt from their crimes in the past. As he hears them discussing severity of their sins against him, Joseph actually starts weeping. Hope is stirring in his heart that there will be a chance for true reconciliation. Hope that a proper fear of the Lord in their hearts will be directing them away from evil.

Like Joseph's brothers, there's nothing we can do to make up for our sins. All we can do is seek the love and faithfulness of God, and allow a healthy, reverent fear in our hearts to keep us on the path of righteousness. Trust in the atoning work of Jesus.

## Devotional 2 - Discerning

### Read Proverbs 20:5

Joseph wants to be reconciled with his family, but he needs to have a good understanding of their motives and hearts. Do they have true remorse for their crimes against him, or are they just upset that they might get in trouble? The test Joseph is constructing is designed to get that information...to find out the purposes in the hearts of his brothers.

It takes great wisdom and understanding to look past the surface of a person and into their heart. People very often put on a show for other people, pretending to be something they're not. It's important for us to be discerning as well, because we don't want to find ourselves trusting in someone who later plans to betray us. We might look to see how they act when they're not around us, or maybe see how they treat us when they don't have anything to gain. For Joseph, he wants to see if they're willing to betray each other, or if they've finally learned to act like a loving family. As you interact with people, pay attention to the signs that they might not be the person they pretend to be, and seek wisdom so you won't be deceived.

## Prayer Topics

God would work reconciliation in broken relationships

God would show you the work He is preparing you to accomplish

God would give you strength to forgive those who have wronged you

God will give you wisdom to recognize false motives and deceit

# Joseph Part 4 - The Awkward Reunion Genesis 42

## Devo 1

Read Proverbs 16:6

Joseph's brothers have committed a pretty horrible sin against him, something they never really could make up for.

## Devo 2

Proverbs 20:5

Video

Proverbs 20:22 – Do not say, “I will repay evil”; wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.

What would you do, if you finally had the chance to get even with the person who hurt you? What would you say? What would you feel? We've seen Joseph go through a lot, sold into slavery, thrown into prison, and eventually rise to power as the king of Egypt recruits him to save the country from starvation. Yet this week, he faces a new challenge, perhaps the most difficult of all. He finds himself face to face with his brothers, the ones who hated him, betrayed him, sold him into slavery. They've come to Egypt to buy food during this famine, and they don't realize that the man they're standing in front of now is their brother they cast aside long ago. Now, Joseph has all the power, he's the one who gets to decide what to do.

Just imagine, face to face with the people who hurt you. What would you do? Rub it in their faces? Laugh at their hunger? Remind them of all the things they did to hurt you? Just close yourself off, shut the conversation down, and send them away hungry? If we allow bitterness to grow inside of us, to take root and gain control of our entire lives, that's often what happens. The moment we get a chance to get even, we take it. Now that we have the power, we finally get to hurt them back. And if we don't get that chance, we can sometimes carry that bitterness with us our entire lives, never finding peace because we're always worried about getting our revenge.

Yet in Joseph, we don't see any signs of that bitterness. He's made peace with what happened; he's trusted that God brought him here, to this moment, for a purpose. And that's important for each of us. If we're going to be able to go through life forgiving those who hurt us, moving on from the pain they left us, one of the important pieces of the puzzle we need is an understanding that God is bringing us into a future that He has planned for us. Something good, something to be hopeful for. This proverb reminds us that we don't need to go through life carrying the burden of needing to repay evil for evil. We don't need to let a desire for revenge consume us. Instead, wait for the right moment, the right timing from God, and God will bring about something good from the pain you've gone through. He's a God of hope, and healing, and restoration.

Now, don't miss the point of this proverb. God is not saying that we allow the people who hurt us to continue hurting us, he's not saying we don't punish evil in the appropriate way, but

rather that we need to respond with reverence first. Joseph sees his brothers here, but he keeps his identity a secret. He decides that he needs to test them before he reveals his identity to them, he wants to see if the condition of their hearts has changed. If he reveals that he's their brother, will they go back to hating him? Will they try to betray him again? Joseph wants to be reconciled with his brothers, but he needs the answer to that question first. And that's true of us too. We want forgiveness and reconciliation to take place, but we also need to be careful that we don't allow the people who want to hurt us to continue exploiting us. Joseph tests his brothers by pretending to be angry, accusing them of being spies, and putting them into a crisis. One of them has to stay behind in prison, while the others go back home to bring back their youngest brother, Benjamin. Joseph wants to see if these brothers have really learned to love each other, or if they're going to just keep on betraying their own family members. But, we'll see how that story plays out next week.

And I also want to say, forgiveness doesn't mean that the one who does evil doesn't get punished. A judge can declare that someone is guilty of committing a crime, and the person will have to pay the consequences. But that's justice, not revenge. Revenge is the desire to see someone else get hurt because of the pain they caused you. Often, if we look deep enough, we can see that it's rooted in hatred and pride, not in righteousness. Justice is different, it's not about hurting someone, it's about paying the appropriate penalty for the crime. Justice can be satisfied when the right price is paid, but you'll often find that revenge is never satisfied, no matter how much of it you get. It always leaves you empty for just a little more, and bit by bit it destroys a little piece of you in the process.

Look, I know forgiveness is a difficult thing, probably the most difficult thing Jesus commands us to do. But we can do it because Jesus died to forgive us. We need to remember that we're also the ones who have sinned against God, and needed forgiveness. Jesus had to die so that we could be forgiven, and that was a much greater debt than anyone could ever owe us. And now, we have the promise of eternal life, so really what's the worst that anyone can do to us? Romans 8, verses 31 through 39, says:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who then is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”<sup>[i]</sup>

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,<sup>[k]</sup> neither the present nor the



future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The key to forgiving others is to know that there is nothing they can say or do that can separate us from God's love and purpose for us. God's plans always win. So don't worry about getting even.

Well, it certainly has been an exciting few weeks, hasn't it? It's been really encouraging to see all the messages and congratulations from everyone about Lara and I getting engaged, and we're looking forward to seeing what God's going to do in the months ahead. Meanwhile, we've wrapped up our series going through the Psalms, the last two weeks looking at Psalm 139 and thinking about God's presence, and His involvement in even the trivial details of our lives. God didn't create us by accident, and no matter what our mistakes we're not going to foil His plans for us.

Thinking about this Psalm reminded me of a story in the old testament, during a time when the nation of Aram tried to attack the nation of Israel. The king of Aram gets his entire army together, surrounds Samaria, and insists that Israel surrender and give the Arameans whatever they want. Ahab is king of Israel at the time, and while he's willing to surrender at first, he realizes that the Arameans are just going to keep on taking and taking and not stop, and they'd probably just kill him even if he surrenders.

Interestingly, even though Ahab is a really evil king, and was constantly turning his back on God and trying to kill God's prophets, God decides to step in here. Ahab may be evil, but God still cares about his people, and wants to save them. So a prophet comes, and tells Ahab that he should go into battle, and even though he was outnumbered he would win. So, Ahab sends his forces into battle, completely outnumbered, and an interesting thing happens. You see, the Arameans were so confident that they couldn't lose this battle, they were just sitting around in their tents getting drunk. As the Israelites start advancing to attack, the Arameans didn't have any defense ready at all, their leaders didn't give any real orders, and they ended up getting totally wiped out. Good rule of life, never put a drunk guy in charge of your army.

Now, the king of Aram retreats, and he consults with his advisers, to try to see why they lost this battle. In their minds, it had nothing to do with all their leaders being drunk during the battle, but had everything to do with God. Look at what happens in 1 Kings 20:23-25

Meanwhile, the officials of the king of Aram advised him, "Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they." <sup>24</sup> Do this: Remove all the kings from their commands and replace them with other officers. <sup>25</sup> You must also raise an army like the one you lost—horse for horse and chariot for chariot—so we can fight Israel on the plains. Then surely we will be stronger than they." He agreed with them and acted accordingly.

Back during this time, a lot of people had the idea that the different gods were limited to certain areas or certain powers. One god could have power over the weather, another over crops, another might be the god of an ocean, and another a god of a mountain. The Arameans decide that Israel's God must be a God of the hills, because that's where this battle was. If they just change locations, they can fight the Israelites without their pesky God getting in the way. And also...make sure we're not drunk this time...side note.

So the Arameans go in again with a huge army, this time taking up a position at a valley. Ok, they're set now, right? We're at a valley, so God won't have any power, and we're not drunk this time, and we have them outnumbered, there's no way we're losing.

There's a very famous quote right here in verse 28: The man of God came up and told the king of Israel, "This is what the LORD says: 'Because the Arameans think the LORD is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the LORD.'"

God is a god of the hills, and of the valleys. The highs and the lows. And sure enough, God wins the battle, and the Aramean army is so devastated that they run back to one of their cities to escape. They get to that city, and a section of the wall ends up collapsing on the army and kills even more soldiers. Even in their own city, they aren't safe from God. The king of Aram is so terrified at this point, he just finds the most hidden, secure room in the city he can and goes there to hide.

I think there's a very interesting lesson in this story. Very often you'll find people try to compartmentalize God. God belongs in this part of my life, but not that part. He can be my God on Sundays, but other days of the week...I have other stuff going on. You'll also see people put limits on what God can do; ok, maybe God can help me with this problem, but this other problem, that's too tough, no way God can do that. Whenever we limit God in these ways, we miss out on some of the things God has to offer us. We miss out on the peace and joy we have from knowing God is in control of our situations. We miss out on some of the protection God's laws offer us to keep us from things that hurt us. God knows us, he built us from the inside out, and we're best off when we include God in every aspect of our lives. So this week, let's pray that last line of Psalm 139 –

Search me, God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

<sup>24</sup>See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

### Proverbs 16:28

A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a **gossip** separates close friends.

Some people just know how to make a fight worse, don't they? We're talking about dealing with conflicts this week, and like we talked about on Sunday, few things stir up a conflict better than gossip. Sometimes it can be hard to define gossip, because it's more than just talking about someone else. Take a look at these two proverbs.

### Proverbs 11:13

A **gossip** betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret.

### Proverbs 20:19

A **gossip** betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much.

We see that gossiping involves revealing information that is best kept confidential. Talking about someone else in a way you know they wouldn't want you to be talking about them, sharing things that are more likely to harm their reputation than help it.

This is a problem in a lot of our churches today. Often there's an excuse behind the gossip; "Oh I just thought you should know" or "This way we know how to help that person" And there can be a time for that, but it takes a great deal of wisdom to know when to share sensitive information and when not to. And when you do, make sure it's very clear who is allowed to know this information and who isn't, so we don't end up starting a chain of people sharing information they shouldn't be.

How do we overcome the temptation to gossip? Remember that someone's reputation is very important, and doing things to harm someone's reputation is like doing direct harm to them. And you know what, people find out. They notice that they're starting to be treated differently, they notice comments that weren't there before, and before long their relationships start breaking down, friendships start falling apart. And believe me, you don't want to be the one responsible for something like that. We serve a God who has a heart for reconciliation, and that should be our heart as well.

So what can we do once gossip has already done damage? Apologies sometimes help, but sometimes the person who was hurt is just not going to be ready to forgive. We should do our best to cut off any future opportunities for gossip, and make sure our words are encouraging and helpful.

Proverbs 17:9 Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.

Avoid bringing up the pain of the past, unless it's in a specific setting to help someone deal with their pain. And sometimes bringing in a respected mediator goes a long way in bringing people back together.

As we continue looking at proverbs that deal with managing conflicts this week, we'll see that there are a lot of different actions we can take; there's no one size fits all when it comes to healing and reconciliation. So let's continue to think carefully on this topic, and seek the wisdom needed to handle the conflicts we'll all face in life. And as much as you can, avoid a gossip, because you know they're going to make every conflict worse.



## Governance, Politics, and Christ

Our sermon this Sunday was on a very familiar story in the Bible, Daniel in the lions' den. Daniel is about to be promoted to a very high position in the Persian Empire, and some of his enemies try to stop that from happening. They have a problem though, he's really good at his job and he's really honest, so they can't find anything to get him in trouble for. So they come up with an idea, they know he prays every day, so they decide to trick the king into making it illegal to pray for the next 30 days. The king passes the law, and Daniel continues to pray every day anyway. So they bring Daniel in, they tell the king that Daniel is violating the law, and the king is forced to throw Daniel into a pit of lions overnight, even though he likes Daniel doesn't want to. He doesn't have a choice, he passed a law that he couldn't undo. And we know how the story ends, God protects Daniel throughout the night, and he comes out the next morning unharmed.

Romans 13:1-7 says

"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. **2** Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. **3** For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. **4** For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. **5** Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

<sup>6</sup>This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. <sup>7</sup>Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."

One of the interesting things about what the Apostle Paul writes in this passage, is he was living in a time where Christians were actively being persecuted by the government. Paul himself was killed by the Roman government for being a Christian. Wait a second, Paul, how can you say that governments are established by God, even when they're going against God? And what are we supposed to do when the government passes an evil law that we're not supposed to obey? How can they be God's servants?

One of the things you notice about the story of Daniel, is Daniel doesn't try to defend his actions before he's thrown to the lions. As near as we can tell, he doesn't try to get out of the punishment. In one sense he rebelled against the law, but in another sense he also submitted to it by accepting the punishment. Daniel had just seen the Babylonian Empire wiped out and replaced by the Persian Empire, so he knows that God can take down a nation whenever he wants. In this new nation, Daniel had an important government position, but that position wasn't as important as obeying God and continuing to pray.

As we follow God, we always find ourselves subject to some kind of governance, wherever we live. Or maybe we find ourselves in some position of governance, where we're in charge of something important like Daniel was. Governance is the job of keeping society functioning well, so that we're able to live in peace. Some people, do it better than others.



That's different than politics. Governance is about leading a society and keeping it working; politics is about allegiance. It's about building followers and support, having allies. As Christians, we may find ourselves under different kinds of governance throughout our lives, but our allegiance is always to God alone. That doesn't mean we can't serve our leaders or communities, Daniel was serving his king very faithfully, but when it came time to choose between following God or following a law, he chose to follow God. He didn't try to build political alliances, he didn't try to get support from other people, or get votes in an election to gain power, he simply continued to pray.

I'm sure you've seen in the past year, people obsessed with politics. I like this leader, I'm going to follow this leader, no, you're bad, we need to follow this leader. Politics often forces people into pledging their allegiance to someone who really isn't that good, someone you normally wouldn't want in charge, but you're convinced you have to support them because of your political allegiance. When that happens, you need to be careful, because you can find yourself very quickly turned away from God, and relying on people who don't have very good motives.

But notice something very interesting about Daniel, even after being thrown into a pit with lions, he continued to serve the Persian king. The next morning Daniel comes out, and he doesn't say, "oh you're a bad king now, I'm not going to work for you anymore." Despite everything that happened, he continued to faithfully help the king govern the Persian Empire, because he knew that was the reason God had him there. And ultimately, the Persian Empire is what allows the nation of Israel to be rebuilt after having been destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. Now we need to be careful, be wise about how we serve in a country that passes laws against God, but if we can help keep the peace and keep society functioning without being forced to do or support evil, let's do it whenever we can. And of course when we vote, we do our best to vote for whoever seems wise or moral to us. Sometimes that's no one, but we try anyway. And sometimes it can get bad enough that the only good choice is to leave. Proverbs 28:12 says When the righteous triumph, there is great celebration; but when the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding.

It can be hard to trust God when wicked people come to power. I'm sure a lot of us are worried about Armenia, and Artsakh right now. What's going to happen now that Azerbaijan has been able to steal so much, and destroy so many lives? Will we ever be safe again? What's going to happen to the Armenians that have to flee their homes to escape? Has God forgotten about us?

I don't know what's going to happen in the future. I do know this, wicked people come to power sometimes, and even if they hold on to it their whole lives, one day they're going to die and stand before God for judgement, and on that day it doesn't matter how much power they had here on earth. There's no army to hide behind, no political alliance to help them. If we can stop evil, we should, but if we can't we'll leave things in God's hands and instead do good where we can. Because ultimately, our allegiance is with Jesus, who died for us so we could have eternal life.

That's my video for the week, hope everyone is doing well, and as always if you ever need anything, I'm one phone call away.

You want a funny story that happened to Paul about this, and we read this story over the summer together, shortly after he wrote this letter to the Romans, he gets arrested in Jerusalem, and he gets brought into the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin. The high priest is there, people are angry, and at one point the high priest tells someone to punch him in the face. Paul doesn't realize it was the high priest

that said that, so he shouts back at him and calls him a whitewashed wall. Everyone gasps and says, how can you say that to the high priest? And Paul stops and says, oh, sorry, I didn't know he was the high priest, I wouldn't have said it if I knew. He was probably thinking about this letter he had just written, and thinking oh man, I just told everyone to not do what I just did. I think it's a funny story, because on the one hand while God does tell us to be respectful to our leaders, some leaders make that just a little harder than others. I think that's something maybe I need to do a better job of working on too.

Alternative Joke:

You have to imagine that things were super awkward between Daniel and King Darius after this lion incident. Daniel goes back to the job, king calls him in for a meeting, and they have to discuss lion cage maintenance or something. Daniel says, yeah, you know, when I was down there, I saw there was quite a bit of rust on that lion cage door, I think we're going to have to send someone in to repair it. And I think lion number 2 needs a haircut, his hair's getting kinda long.

It is so good to be worshipping with you today. The world can be filled with danger, but when we come together to worship God, there is great joy. For those of you who don't know me, my name is matt. I've been friends with Pastor Winston's team for many years and I have been coming with them to Haiti for many years. I don't get to come very often because I have a lot of work back home. I teach at a university and I also teach at my church. At church, I mostly teach the young people. It's been a very difficult year for many of them. There has been a lot of danger and confusion. Because of that, I decided to teach them about the book of acts. Act is filled with many stories of danger and adventure. It follows the story of the apostles after Jesus Rose from the dead and return to heaven. The apostles faced a lot of difficulties, but God was always guiding them. So today, I want to talk about one of Paul's adventures in a city called Philippi . Acts 16:16-24.

Paul and his friends have been going around the city telling people about Jesus. At some point they meet a little girl. This girl is possessed by an evil spirit. The spirit caused her to predict the future. At first, maybe this sounds like a good thing. I would like to predict the future. If I know what's going to happen in the future, I can prepare for it. Unfortunately evil men were keeping this child as a slave. They would make money off her. She has something that looks like a good gift but the reality is it was keeping her a slave. Satan does this to us sometimes. He gives us something that looks good but ends up keeping us a slave. Paul sees this and gets upset. He doesn't like seeing this girl trapped as a slave. So he heals her and sets her free. This is the power of Jesus to set us free. It doesn't matter what is controlling us God Can set us free. Jesus says that anyone who sins is a slave to sin. Sin is controlling us. But if the sun set you free, you will be free. Some people are a slave to anger. They are controlled by hatred. They can't find peace. Some people are a slave to greed. They always want to take. Some people are a slave to alcohol. They are always drinking. Other people abandoned their families to chase after other relationships. They are trapped by immorality. But Jesus can set us free. People are not happy when they are free. When we are free, they can't make money from us anymore. We see in the story men are not happy that the girl is free. They get angry at Paul. They get a whole crowd together and have him arrested. Paul was innocent. He committed no crime. But he was beaten and thrown into prison anyway. But the story isn't over. Let's see the end. Acts 16:25-40.

We learn something interesting in this story. Paul was a Roman citizen. If you are a Roman citizen, you have special rights. People are not allowed to put you in prison without a trial. But it's interesting that Paul doesn't mention this in the beginning. He could've avoided going to prison by saying that he is a Roman citizen. But he stays quiet. Why does he do this? Paul is encouraging each of us. We will be persecuted for being Christian. People will be angry at us when we set others free. But remember that Paul went through the same persecutions. He could praise God even when he was in jail. We can praise God also. Jesus faced all the same difficulties. We are facing now. And he will strengthen us through them. In our story, we see that Paul isn't done saving people yet. There is a big earthquake. The jailbreaks. All the prisoners have the chance to run away. The guard is terrified. If any prisoner escapes, he would be killed. He would experience great Shame. He would be humiliated. It would be so bad. He would rather kill himself right there. Paul could stay quiet and let the guard kill himself. Then Paul could escape. But Paul calls out to him and saves him. Because Paul was willing to suffer in prison he

is able to save this man and his entire family. If it wasn't for Paul, everyone would have run away after the earthquake and the guard would've killed himself. But Paul was willing to suffer and many people are saved. We will all suffer as Christians. People will mock us. People will attack us. But always remember that our suffering can bring salvation to other people.

When I was a child, I had a lot of suffering. When I was 15, I came down with cancer and almost died. Even now my body is still in pain sometimes. But because of suffering, I was able to help more people. My suffering brought me closer to God. Because of this, I have great joy. If my suffering can bring more people to God, I am willing to go through it again. If one more person can be saved because of my suffering, I am happy to go through it. So don't be discouraged because of suffering and persecution. One day we will all be together in heaven, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. We will see all the people who came to Jesus because of the hardships we went through. And we will have great joy. And we will hear the greatest words we could ever imagine from Jesus. Well done, good and faithful servant. Come join your masters happiness.

When loving your enemy turns into hating your neighbor

I have been amazed in these last months at the amount of hatred pouring out across the United States. Whether it's directed at other countries, ethnicities, religions, political groups, or even particular occupations, this country seems more polarized than I've ever seen it. On top of that, people seem to feel fully justified in their hatred; even people that quote Jesus on other days of the week. While it's fair to say I can't fully diagnose the problem as to why hatred seems more dominating in our society, part of me can't help but wonder if this kind of hatred infiltrates people that go to church simply because they don't actually know what Jesus taught. In that light, here's a little summary of the things Jesus taught that people in modern day America seem to hate the most:

Matthew 5:38-42

-You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.-

We have a very self-centered notion of justice in the US. We love suing people and counter suing people and making sure we get what we 'deserve' when there's an argument. We convince ourselves that we have to fight for our rights, because if we don't then it will look like we are wrong. When we examine Jesus' words, however, we get a slightly different instruction. The first part, the strike on the right cheek, was an insult. Rather than respond with more insults and arguments, Jesus calls us to show that we refuse to drop down to someone else's level. Logically, this makes perfect sense (who has ever truly won an insult war anyway?), but emotionally it isn't natural. We have to constantly fight the urge to retaliate.

The tunic and cloak; while both were items of clothing, the cloak was more valuable by far, so much so that Jewish law stated that someone who was holding a cloak in pledge from someone, they had to return it every night so that person had something warm to sleep in. This is a very difficult teaching to accept; when someone, even an evil person, sues you, give them more than what they ask for. This is even an easier teaching to practice now than 2000 years ago; now we have crowd sourcing and "go fund me" pages that allow us to take donations from people all over the country when we are unjustly sued or fined. During Jesus' time, there were very few resources available for someone in a similar situation, yet still he gives this challenge. Granted, suing back then tended to be tied more toward debtors and creditors, rather than the large barrage of topics we sue people over in modern times, but the principle still stands.

In the same light, Jesus goes a step further. In countries under Roman occupation, Roman soldiers were allowed to force people to carry their military equipment for one mile. Jewish people would have marks along the road outside their towns, designating exactly where that one mile would end and they could drop the equipment and go back home. Jesus instead teaches his followers to ignore what little rights they had under an oppressive government, and go further. We often speak of the idea of "going the

extra mile” without really understanding the full implications. I remember some time ago, a church in Houston was protesting the demands from the city to turn over manuscripts from sermons on topics related to homosexuality. In the end the city dropped the demand, but I recall thinking as I read that story, what a wasted opportunity to go the extra mile. What a wasted opportunity to give the cloak as well as the tunic; particularly in a situation that would never result in any negative consequences. The church could have turned over dozens of sermons, categorized by different topics, for everyone to read, yet instead chose to hide in a little shell. When we spend all our time demanding our rights, which miss the opportunity to really obey what Jesus taught.

Matthew 6:14-15

-For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.-

A step beyond not resisting the insults and demand that Jesus tells us to acquiesce to in the previous passage, is forgiving those who insult us and make those demands. Unfortunately for us, Jesus indicates here and in many other places in his teaching that forgiveness is an inherent requirement in the Kingdom of God. If you can't forgive your neighbors, and yes, even your enemies, you have no business pretending that you are following Jesus. Again, this is an extremely difficult thing for us to follow, but at the same time something easy. It is difficult emotionally for us to forgive others when we are wronged, but it is also empowering. It's discarding bitterness in our hearts and picking up peace instead. I've often heard it said that harboring bitterness in your heart is like swallowing poison and hoping someone else dies; logically we understand that it does nothing but hinder us, but emotionally it is a challenge to fight for the strength to forgive. Once we master forgiveness, though, we find a strength we never believed we could obtain. Granted, forgiveness does not mean we continually allow someone to hurt or exploit us (or others, for that matter), but it does mean we no longer define our future by the pain in our past.

I look at how many in the United States treat people from the Middle East, or Muslims, and am amazed that people who call themselves followers of Jesus not only refuse to forgive people fighting on the other side of the world, they seem intent on holding innocent people culpable for the very violence they are fleeing. As refugees seek shelter anywhere in the world from the wars that threaten their lives, how many who call themselves followers of Jesus refuse to give them even a second thought? Rather than forgiving those who wrong us, we nonsensically expand our anger to those who haven't even wronged us. Rather than demonstrate the power of compassion and mercy, I see people give in to the same hatred that fuels these wars all over the world, all the while blind to the destruction it brings to their own souls.

Matthew 19:9

-I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.-

Little change of topic, but God is pretty clear throughout the Bible. Malachi 2:16 – “I hate divorce,” says the Lord God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the Lord Almighty.

In the debates of Jesus’ time, there was a question among Jewish lawyers and teachers about what proper grounds for a divorce were. The most extreme opinions were that even a burnt meal prepared by a wife was proper grounds for a divorce. With this mindset, on multiple occasions people came to Jesus asking when it was proper for a man to divorce his wife (in Jewish culture at the time, usually only a man could initiate a divorce, although Roman law allowed for either to initiate). Jesus responded every time equating divorce with adultery. It was never appropriate for a man to divorce his wife, and the only reason God ever allowed it in the first place was because God knew people would never obey such a law (their “hearts were hard” as Jesus said), and was simply creating a system that would ensure some level of rights for those who were divorced.

Ignoring the discussion on unfaithfulness or abusive spouses, and possible exceptions to this steadfast rule (since that discussion would require a lot more than I really have room for here), we can at least focus on the concept of the ‘no-fault divorce’ that has been legal in California since 1970, and is currently legal in all states (the last state to pass no-fault divorce laws was New York in 2010). These laws are reflected in divorce rates across the country; while a small portion of the population is responsible for most of the divorces (over 70% of couples currently married in the US are in their first marriage), the fact of the matter is divorce is probably the most ignored area of sexual immorality by churches in the US. You can find many churches that will protest laws acknowledging marriages between homosexuals, and many churches that teach abstinence before marriage, but it’s very rare to encounter a church that protests laws allowing for no-fault divorce, or even addresses the topic in sermons. On the contrary, many of the most popular Republican presidential candidates in recent elections (the party typically associated with conservative Christian values) have been through several divorces (some even accompanying various extramarital affairs). While we can spend a great deal of time speculating as to why this is such an ignored topic in the US, at the very least it’s a strong example of one of Jesus’ most consistent teachings that seems to be consistently ignored here in the US.

Matthew 6:19-20

-Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.-

In America, success is almost universally measured by the amount of wealth you have accumulated. While there may be some backlash against those who have accumulated their wealth at the expense of others, or those who use it for gross self-indulgence, for the most part Americans look quite favorably upon those who have amassed fortunes for themselves, regardless of how those fortunes are used. Very rarely is there any mentioning from the more influential religious leaders regarding Jesus’ challenge that you cannot love both God and money. On the contrary, some of the most popular preachers in

America today have a message that's almost solely focused on prosperity; a message that states if you're wealthy and healthy and famous, that means God has blessed you.

Unfortunately, that's essentially opposite of what Jesus taught. Luke's account of Jesus' teachings have an even more direct stance: In Luke 6:20, Jesus states "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," and continues to elaborate in verse 24 "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." This contrast is displayed in many places in Jesus' teachings, and while it isn't a disapproval of working hard to support yourself and others, it is a harsh criticism of storing up money simply for your own comfort. Earning money so you can help those in need does have a very important place in the life of every Christian, but when the goal of earning is to simply amass money, we have deviated completely from one of Jesus' most consistent teachings.

Matthew 5:43-48

-You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.-

Loving your enemies is probably the number one most rejected teaching of Jesus. To be fair, it is a difficult challenge, particularly when there are innocent lives at stake. What does loving your enemies look like when the Nazis are conquering Europe, or ISIS is beheading civilians? There is a slightly different context, as Jesus is talking to poor farmers and fishermen, and not military soldiers or police officers in charge of protecting the population. There are some applicable principles however; the basis for the command is the character of God. Luke 6:27-36 gives a similar account:

-But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.-

There is nothing Jesus taught that forbids us from protecting those in need, but we should be quick to show mercy and compassion; even to our enemies. We can think of the church in Charleston church victims, who forgave the shooter who attacked their friends and family. Or stories during the American civil war, where soldiers in the midst of a battle became overwhelmed with the suffering of their



opponents, and stopped to provide some water to a dying enemy soldier. We may have an obligation to protect at times, but at some point the smoke will clear and the enemy's weapons will be lying on the ground. What then? What will your mindset be? Hurt them as much as they have hurt you? Laugh at their pain, their loss, and suffering? Do you go into battle hoping that your enemy will die, or do you pray that they would see the error of their ways and turn?

I remember four years ago in a Republican debate in South Carolina, one of the candidates was booed when he suggested the United States use the Golden Rule as a policy for international relations; that we not do to other countries what we wouldn't want them to do to us. The room full of conservative Republicans found the notion entirely disgusting. Rather, in the current political debates, we see calls for carpet bombing of civilians in cities occupied by ISIS met with cheering adoration. People in the United States love to see their enemies killed, and they don't care how many innocent lives are lost in the process. Far from showing any measure of compassion for our enemies, we show a complete lack of compassion for even the victims of our enemies. Here in the US, we have gone even further from loving our enemies to actually hating our own neighbors; anyone who belongs to a differing ethnic or political identity is mocked and reviled, and this from people who claim to follow Jesus. The immature insults on Facebook alone are enough to make one cringe.

We often cite Jesus' "Parable of the Good Samaritan" as an example of what it means to love your neighbor, but technically the parable wasn't about teaching what being a good neighbor entailed. The question Jesus was answering was "Who is my neighbor?" in Luke chapter 10. In Jesus' parable, the Jewish person was the one in need, and the hated foreigner was the one who came to the rescue (and let's be clear, at this time in history, Jews and Samaritans most definitely hated each other). The man questioning Jesus was trying to get some standard from Jesus about who he actually had to worry about when it came to loving his neighbor; and Jesus responded with a parable that concluded that even his hated enemy who lived in an entirely different country could be considered his neighbor. The teaching, if we're willing to accept it in context, is quite clear; you cannot draw lines along nationalities or political ideologies or religious views and pretend that you have no obligation to those on the other side. Yes, the parable gives a challenge as to actions we should take to be good neighbors, but it also goes beyond that to challenge the very excuses we make to avoid showing compassion and mercy to others. If we're looking for a line to draw as to who we help and who we ignore, we've completely missed the message. Why? Because we're supposed to see people as God sees them; we're challenged to be merciful, holy, and yes, even perfect, as God is. It is a frightening thing when some of the most popular leaders today are the furthest from this mindset.

So that's it; a list of some of the most rejected teachings of Jesus in modern day America. On one hand, they are very difficult teachings to follow; it requires a great deal of trust, and willingness to put aside our own pride. But these teachings are not just commands; they are also promises with rewards. Perhaps not all of these rewards will be received while we're here on earth, but the promises stand none the less. The only question is how much we are going to trust these words written down two thousand years ago, and how hard we're willing to work to sow the field for a harvest.

This week at church, we looked at an interesting passage where Jesus, the son of God, goes to John the Baptist to be baptized. This seems strange, certainly John found it strange, because Jesus seems like the last person who would ever need to be baptized. He's the perfect son of God, what sin could he possibly need to repent from? But Jesus says this is necessary, because part of his assignment on earth is to live the righteous life on earth that we couldn't, and go through all the same things we go through.

I want to turn our attention to what happens next though, because there's something very significant that happens as Jesus begins his ministry. John chapter 3 tells us that Jesus and his disciples started baptizing people as well, close to where John was doing his ministry. At some point, some people go to John and point out to him that the crowds are now going to Jesus, and less people are interested in what John is saying and doing. What will happen to John if people just start ignoring him? Is John going to lose his ministry? John, meanwhile, has a very important response to this in John 3:27-30

To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."

This is a very important line: He must become greater, I must become less. John knows that his purpose was to point people toward Jesus; the more people that are going to Jesus now, the more he knows that he has fulfilled his purpose. His mission, given to him by God, was a success, and now the Messiah is here. This is everything John the Baptist was waiting for.

John is teaching us an important lesson here, because we can often be very tempted to connect our success to how many people are following and admiring us. YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, all these social media platforms, it's filled with people whose sole goal is to draw attention to themselves. They want the views and the likes and the followers for their own reputation, and it's a competition to see who draws in the most people.

That can happen in Christian circles too. A lot of Christians measure the success of their ministry by how many people show up, or how many members their church has, or how popular they are. Leaders can sometime act like they're in competition with each other; getting jealous over the successes of other people, getting bitter when they feel like they're not as popular as someone else. This then leads to conflict, and disunity, and the people of God suffer as a result.

The reality is that the goal of every Christian ministry should be to point people towards Jesus. If your focus is on being faithful with the assignments God has given you, it doesn't matter if you have ten people or a thousand people listening to you, or if the guy next door is more popular, or anything else you might use to compare yourself to someone else. Direct people's attention to God, and not yourself. And in that focus, you'll find that the things that upset other people don't seem to bother you. You don't get overwhelmed questioning whether or not you're good enough, you don't get distracted by the burdens other people try to put on you. Instead, your focus is on Christ, and his peace is what fills your heart.

As we go through this series in Matthew, let us always remember that Jesus is the king, and we're not in competition with him. He'll be leading and guiding us, so don't get side tracked by concerns for your own fame and glory.

## Hope in Dark Times

Well, it's a beautiful day today, sun's out, nice cool breeze. Just had my chemo treatment Monday, still hooked up to it actually, and feeling pretty good, but I thought it would be nice to continue some thoughts from my sermon Sunday. At church, I talked about how Jehoram took over as king after Jehoshaphat died, and today I want to look at what happened after. Unlike Jehoshaphat, Jehoram was pretty evil, and did a lot of really messed up things. Not surprising, given that the first thing he does when he gets power is kill off his own siblings.

So, just to set the stage here, the time is around 850 BC or so. The Israelites are split into two nations, the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. In the northern kingdom, you have Ahab and Jezebel ruling, two of the most evil people in the entire Bible. In the south, you have Jehoshaphat, really good, righteous king. But for whatever reason, he decides he wants to make an alliance with Ahab and Jezebel, and has his son Jehoram marry their daughter Athaliah. After Jehoshaphat dies and Jehoram and Athaliah take over, they end up being more like Ahab and Jezebel than Jehoshaphat, and start doing a lot of pretty evil things. The end result was the southern kingdom getting weaker, enemy nations started attacking them and stealing stuff, and in the end almost all of Jehoram's kids are killed, and Jehoram dies of a very painful illness. 2 Chronicles 21:20 says he died "to no one's regret", which is just such a sad ending. Nobody was sad he was gone. All that's left is his youngest son, Ahaziah, who takes over as king at the age of 22. He kept up this alliance with Ahab's son, Joram, who would have been his uncle. He didn't even last a year as king before he got himself killed.

That's when things really started looking bad. As soon as Ahaziah gets himself killed, Athaliah makes a move for power, and tries to claim the nation for herself. She starts killing everyone off who could possibly have some claim to the throne, all her own family members, even her own grandchildren, with the goal of setting herself up as queen. And she almost succeeded. The line of David was almost completely wiped out...except for one.

You see, Jehoram and Athaliah also had a daughter, Jehosheba, and she didn't follow in their footsteps. She, instead, chooses the path of righteousness, despite the evil of her parents. She's actually married to the high priest, Jehoiada, and they're going to do what they can to prevent the nation from being destroyed. So in a desperate move, Jehosheba grabs her newborn nephew, Ahaziah's son Joash, and runs away with him. As Athaliah continues her evil reign, Jehosheba, Jehoiada, and Joash hide away at the temple, and wait for the right time to act.

It can be hard to know how to act in such dangerous and hopeless times. By going against her mother like this, Jehosheba is risking her own life, and we know Athaliah is more than willing to kill off her own family to gain power. What causes us to have hope when it looks like there's no way forward.

I imagine Jehosheba might have been reminding herself of the promises God made to her ancestor King David, centuries before her. In 2 Samuel, 7:16, God promises David "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever." It can be tough to believe God's promises when the situation looks bad, especially when it seems like it's impossible for the promise to still happen. God promises that David's line will remain, but now there's only one little baby left after Athaliah's murder spree. How is God supposed to keep his promise now?

But Jehosheba and Jehoiada continue to have faith that God will stay true to His word, and after 6 years they find an opportunity to make a move. They gather around enough people for support that they're able to overthrow Athaliah (actually wasn't that hard, she was super evil and everyone hated her), and the entire nation celebrates as 7 year old Joash is set up as king. And what does this 7 year old king do? Undoes all of the messed up stuff his father and grandparents had done, and with the guidance of his aunt and uncle who raised him as their own child, sets the nation back on the right course.

In life, we're all going to face situations that seem hopeless from a human perspective. Whether it's school situations, work situations, medical situations, we will face problems that are beyond our ability to handle. 6 years of a murderous psychopath running a country seems pretty hopeless. But like Jehosheba and Jehoiada, we need to remind ourselves of the promises God has made. Even if we don't know what to do, we don't know how to act, just holding on to the promise, thinking about it, can be enough to at least keep us calm and patient during uncertain times. And really, if God can use a 7 year old to change the course of an entire country, how much more can God help us through our own situations. So this week, think about the different promises God makes in the Bible, maybe even write them down and keep them somewhere, and use them to encourage you during difficult times.

## I Didn't Sign Up For This

### Jeremiah 45: 1-5

The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a book at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: You said, 'Woe is me! For the LORD has added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.' Thus shall you say to him, Thus says the LORD: Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up—that is, the whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not, for behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares the LORD. But I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go."

We usually walk into situations or set out on paths with certain expectations. One goes to medical school expecting to be a doctor, another goes to law school expecting to be a lawyer or perhaps even a judge. When God causes our paths to deviate from our expectations, it can often leave us confused, frustrated, or even discouraged.

The Bible doesn't give us many details about Baruch. We're never told why he joined Jeremiah in the work or what his expectations were, but I like to imagine that Baruch recognized the power Jeremiah had and the importance of his calling. Thoughts of the great prophets of the past: Moses, Samuel, Elijah, or Isaiah were probably passing through his mind. There might have been an expectation to see great miracles and repentance; the nation of Judah turning from the sinful worship of idols and coming back to a proper worship of the one true God. Finally, after years of spiritual decay and foolish kings, Jeremiah's words and power would bring people back to the truth. And maybe, just like Elijah's power passed on to Elisha, Jeremiah's power might rub off on Baruch just a little.

I wonder what was going through his mind the day King Jehoiakim burned the scroll he had carefully scribed and faithfully read before the people of Jerusalem. A scroll that had been written in the hopes that it would bring people to repentance. All that work, all that hope, dashed in an instant. Was this really what Baruch had signed up for? To spend his life trying to save people, only to watch them die from their own foolishness?

Jeremiah 45 marks a fascinating transition in the book of Jeremiah. The previous section deals primarily with the events surrounding the conquest of Judah by Babylon; the end of Zedekiah's reign and the issues the Israelites faced afterwards. After chapter 45, we see the various judgments God pronounces on the various nations: Egypt, Moab, and even Babylon. But first, God has a message to Baruch.

We're not told exactly why Baruch is feeling sorrow and despair in this moment, but maybe it was coming to the realization that he wasn't going to see the great miracles and repentance he was hoping for. With King Jehoiakim firmly rejecting the words from God, it was clear the course of the nation wouldn't change. They were headed for judgment and destruction. What

was the point of even trying anymore? In this moment of discouragement, God reaches out and answers Baruch. His emotions, his frustration, his sorrow...they aren't being ignored. God hears him, and wants to respond.

I was fifteen years old when I received my first diagnosis of cancer. Up until that point, I had a lot of expectations of what my life would look like. I was a 4.0 student in school, good at math and science, and was looking forward to the start of high school. I was getting ready for Thanksgiving with the expectation that I would be together with family. Thanksgiving day we got the news; stage 4 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, spread all throughout my body. Pick a body part, and I had a tumor growing there. In a single day, my entire life turned upside-down.

For the next twelve months, I would be dealing with chemotherapy treatments every 3 weeks, with regular scans and blood tests, a weakened body and immune system, and the realization that I wouldn't be able to be the strong, top scoring student I was used to being. It took all my strength just to make it to school for a single, 45-minute class. I was angry, frustrated, and discouraged that my life wasn't going the way I had expected it to.

I was thirty seven years old when I received my second diagnosis of stage 4 cancer. I had beaten the lymphoma after a year of chemotherapy as a child, but now I was faced with a rare, incurable intestinal cancer. Once again, my life is derailed, and I don't know what the future holds. For two years now, I've continued to go through chemotherapy treatments every two weeks, going through great pain and exhaustion. There are days when it's a challenge to just eat and drink, and as of now there's no known way to beat this cancer. I could be doing this the rest of my life.

In those moments, it's normal to cry out to God in the same words of Baruch: "Lord, you have added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning and I find no rest." What is particularly interesting about this passage is that God addresses Baruch's sorrow and emotions before going into the details of the judgement to come on the various nations. Out of everything there is to talk about, God's hurting child is the priority. God sees Baruch's suffering and seeks to encourage him, and that takes priority over the judgements to be declared on the various nations.

Part of God's response may not seem like much of an encouragement. God does acknowledge that things are going to be broken down and uprooted, but also reminds Baruch that these are things that God Himself built and planted. This might remind us of interactions like the one God had with Jonah in Jonah 4:11, when God reminds Jonah that God has pity on all things He has created, and doesn't want to see them destroyed. Baruch may feel sorrow, but perhaps God feels it to even a greater degree, given that these are all things built and planted by Him.

God also has an interesting warning to Baruch: Don't seek great things for yourself, because everything is coming to ruin. Perhaps Baruch thought that his working with Jeremiah would ultimately give him some level of prestige or admiration, and some of his despair may be coming from the realization that this won't be happening. God tells Baruch that he won't be

seeing those great things, but also gives him a promise: even though everything is going to be crashing down, God will be protecting Baruch and seeing him through to the end. As Christians, this can be an important reminder to each of us. As we live in a world that is coming to ruin, we often won't achieve the great things we were hoping to gain. Our plans fall apart; often due to circumstances far outside of our control. And as we cry out to God, saying that sorrow is being added to our pain, God reminds us that our lives will be protected as a prize of war; a prize that Jesus won with his victory over death on the cross. We are a precious prize that Jesus has sacrificed for, and while we don't have all the great treasures and fame that this world offers, we have something far more precious waiting for us in heaven.

Even as Baruch mourns, his work continues to impact people who came long after him. He stayed faithful to God's command; he never sought great things for himself, and today we rarely hear about him. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon preached about Baruch, and if you ask the average person about him they'll probably say they've never heard of him. Yet the only reason we have Jeremiah's words today is because of the work Baruch did. He never became famous, but was instrumental in ensuring that God's word was passed down for future generations. He never saw the full fruit of his labor, but we all benefit today because of it.

After so many years of battling cancer, I often find myself crying out to God in the same words of Baruch. Why do I have to go through this much suffering? Yet one of the encouraging things I get to experience during this suffering is finding out that my life has had an impact on people I haven't even met. People who have read or listened to a sermon or a message I've put together, and found hope even as I suffer with pain and exhaustion. I'm reminded that I'm not here to seek great things for my life, but rather I'm a prize that's destined for heaven. We're allowed to mourn and cry out to God just like Baruch did, and just like Baruch our lives will have an impact on others that we might not ever see this side of eternity. But most importantly, we're a prize that Jesus fought for and won, so let that knowledge sustain us as we go through the sorrow and the pain of life.



## Luke 12:4-7

This is going to seem like a strange way for me to start a sermon, but bear with me for a few minutes and hopefully you will see why I'm starting this way. Trust me, it will make sense by the end. I remember reading about a very high profile criminal case not too long ago, I'm sure many of you saw it in the news. A wealthy man who had spent many years destroying the lives of children, young girls, and hiding behind his money and political connections to avoid the law. Someone so evil that let's not even talk about what he did. Of course eventually everything came to light, his victims came forward, he was arrested, and was finally going to face justice. Of course he was a coward, as those who destroy the lives of children always are, and rather than be willing to face justice, he chose instead to take his own life while in prison, a story not that uncommon. After that happened, I read some statements from some of his victims, and I noticed some saying that they felt they had been denied justice, that somehow this man had escaped the punishment he deserved by taking his own life. As I read that, I remember thinking to myself: You don't realize, that was no escape at all. In his efforts to try to escape human accusers and a human judge, after taking his life he would be met with the supreme judge. A judge who does not take a bribe, who cannot be deceived, who hears the cry of every victim, and will not be satisfied until true justice is done.

I try to wrap my mind around how terrifying that must be. In my mind, pops up this comical image of a boy showing up to the house of the girl he likes, to take her on a date, something out of a TV show or a movie. And it's one of those scenes where he's met by his date's overly protective father at the door, who brings him into the house. And the father explains that his daughter must be home by a certain time, and various rules must be followed during the date, and does something a little threatening in kind of a funny way. You know those kinds of scenes. I doubt many people watched this movie, but there's this funny scene in one of the new Karate Kid movies. The gentle Mr. Miyagi is now mentoring a new student, Julie, and her date comes to pick her up. Of course he's sharpening a knife and cutting vegetables as he comes in, and as the boy is explaining that the date goes until midnight, Mr. Miyagi says, "So, you bring her home by...ten o'clock?" Now of course, Mr. Miyagi is this kind, gentle man, but he's also a dangerous martial arts master, you don't want to get on his bad side. And of course the boy is frightened, says "Oh, absolutely sir, absolutely." That boy knows, his date must be brought back home at the right time, or he will face the wrath of that father. And the wrath of a father who loves his daughter is a terrifying thing to face. How much more terrifying is the wrath of the supreme father, creator of heaven and earth, toward those who would dare to harm his children.

That might seem to be a strange thought to start this sermon with, because in this passage Jesus is commanding us to not be afraid. He's encouraging us, saying again and again in this section of Luke, "Don't be afraid, don't worry." But he starts off here reminding us of God's wrath. He says be afraid of God, who has the power not just to kill, but after to throw us into gehenna. Most of our Bibles translate that word as hell, but literally it was a valley by Jerusalem. I don't think we're sure exactly where it was, probably somewhere around here, but in the times of the old testament it seems to have been the area where Israelites, even kings, practiced child sacrifice. Eventually the area was cursed by God, destroyed, and presumably used as a trash dump, where trash and dead things were thrown and burned. By the time of Jesus, it was being used figuratively to refer to a place of God's wrath and judgement, and Jesus refers to it many times in his warnings to people.

Many of Jesus' parables at some point involve judgement and fire. Think of the parable of the sheep and the goats, as the goats are separated to the left, God says "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." And notice here, this image we have here, this eternal fire that represents God's judgement, it wasn't made for us, was it? It was made for Satan, that's his destiny, that's his punishment. Think also of the image in Revelation 20:14 "Then death and hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death." The end of death, our new resurrected life in new creation, is described as if death itself is being thrown into this fire, forever destroyed so that death and sorrow can never hurt us again. But the warning there is, even those this place of destruction wasn't originally created for us, we could still end up there.

This topic makes us uncomfortable. We don't like to think of it. And I think there are a lot of reasons why that is. Perhaps we're thinking of God's love, and we read in God's word in 2 Peter 3:9 – "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." Or perhaps we read in Ezekiel 33:11 – "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!" Or perhaps we just look at John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And we see these promises, this desire God has to save each one of us from our own sin, and maybe we think "How can God send us to punishment when his heart is to save each one of us?"

Perhaps this topic makes us uncomfortable because we realize that if we got what we really deserved, we'd fall under this judgement and wrath that Jesus talks about. We just finished going through the Sermon on the Mount with the high school and junior high group, and one of the things we noticed was just how high the bar is that Jesus has set for righteousness. Just how we think about other people can get us into trouble. Our anger, our pride, our selfishness, all these things separate us from the perfect holy God, and now we're in trouble. We've fallen short of God's righteous standard, just as throughout history Israel failed to obey God's entire law, and now we don't want to really think about what comes next.

But we need to think about this, we need to reflect on this, and there are two main reasons why doing that will help us conquer our fear. Because remember, Jesus is bringing this up in the context of telling us not to be afraid. He's giving us assurance here, if we're willing to look at it. This is actually what we were talking about last week in our Sunday school class; not being afraid. And I asked the group, what causes you to be afraid of something. I loved the answer the group had: we're afraid of something when we know it has the power to hurt us. That's really what it boils down to, right? Every fear we have is ultimately tied to the power that thing, that person, that situation has to hurt us. The more powerful and more dangerous the thing is, the greater the fear. And how many dangerous and powerful things are we surrounded with all the time. Let's be honest, the world is full of things that have great power to hurt us. Things that we can see and things that we can't see.

And surrounded by all these fears, Jesus points for us to look up. Jesus says, yes, there are powerful and dangerous things here. But you want to know who's the most dangerous? You want to know who has the most power? And in pointing up, he's pointing to himself, and says if you're going to be afraid of anything, be afraid of me, because I'm the one who has the power. Now, watch me use that power. And Jesus goes, and he demonstrates that power by healing the sick. If you're going to be afraid of

anything, be afraid of me because I have the power, now watch me use it. And he goes and he feeds the hungry. If you're going to be afraid of anything, be afraid of me, because I have the power, now watch me use it. And he goes and tells the sinner that they're forgiven. He goes and uses his power to die for our sins, and come back to life to show that death no longer has any victory. That fire that we were afraid of? That fire is where death will be thrown, and no longer do we live in fear of it.

The first verse in the Bible to be translated into Armenian: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Why is this so important? Because once we understand that the only one worth fearing is also the one who loves us more than we could ever imagine, nothing will ever make us afraid. Let me say that again, and listen to this: When we understand the one with all the power, the only one to be afraid of, is the one who loves us, forgives us, and calls us his children, nothing on earth will cause us to fear. That terrifying dad, that overprotective father who loves his daughter dearly, that's our father, and we're the ones he's protective of. There was a beautiful image one pastor shared with me once, of how God helped him deal with his fears. He was at a swimming pool with his daughter, and his little girl gets up to go running off the diving board to jump into the water. No fear at all. And as he's in the water watching her jump toward him, he feels God speaking in his spirit, "The reason this little child isn't afraid is because she knows she has her father right there to keep her safe." We have that heavenly father watching over us. Will we go through dark and dangerous times? Sure. Will we get hurt? Yeah, we will. Does God promise us a day when death will be defeated and every tear will be wiped from our eyes? Yeah, he does.

"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Don't be afraid, you are worth more than sparrows" Some of God's promises are, maybe, more encouraging to some than others. That whole, "The very hairs of your head are numbered" thing? Yeah, well...ok, yes, I think I have that number. It's not a big one, trust me. But what's Jesus saying here? He knows our situation, and he's powerful, and he's on our side. I love that line from the song: His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me. His eye is on those 5 sparrows, worth only a few pennies, how much more is his eye on us? If we're willing to trust him as we walk through this valley of the shadow of death, we have an eternal reward waiting for us that no one can take away.

I said there were two main reasons why reflecting on gehenna, on hell, is important for us to conquer fear. The first one is that: when we know that the only thing worth fearing, God's judgement, has been taken by Jesus so that we won't face it, then nothing can make us afraid. We're more than conquerors through him who loves us. But the second is this, the second reason, is we need to remember that God will still judge the wicked who continue to rebel against him. God is a good judge. A judge who does not take a bribe, who cannot be deceived, who hears the cry of every victim, and will not be satisfied until true justice is done. We need to remind ourselves of this because very often we won't see perfect justice enacted here on earth. We just won't. The corrupt may escape human justice with a bribe. The crafty may deceive human justice with a clever lie. Victims may not have their cries heard by our judges and leaders. Many crimes will go unsolved and unpunished. And for some crimes, for some crimes no punishment seems sufficient. Sometimes God works His justice here on earth for us to see, to remind us that true justice is still there waiting, but not every time. It's always sad to see when I'm in Haiti, the corruption we see there. One of our guys there was accused of a crime, and convicted really without a trial simply because he didn't pay the judge a bribe. The judge didn't care about guilt or innocence, it was all about who could give the bribe. Or one time when our friends there were trying to get a truck through customs that had been donated. The price for bringing the truck through was maybe \$3000 or

something, but when the officials found out that they had friends in America, all of a sudden it was \$12,000 to get it through. And there's nothing we can do, they're the law. I think of the amazing pastors I met in Vietnam, who spent days and even years in prison, just kept there until they ran out of money to take, and then they were released.

Or perhaps as Armenians, we think of the genocide, crimes committed a century ago, perpetrated by evil men who have long since died and will never be brought to justice by a human court. Instead they will answer to God himself, the supreme father of all those they killed. I think they would have been better off facing a human judge. And I need to say this here too; a good understanding of gehenna isn't just for conquering our fears, we also need it to be able to let go of the pain of our past. The pain left over from those who hurt us. To give up on revenge and leave our case in God's hands. We will never believe God is good and can be trusted with our futures if we don't acknowledge that in the end he's a good judge: A judge who does not take a bribe, who cannot be deceived, who hears the cry of every victim, and will not be satisfied until true justice is done. And for those of us who have put our trust in His salvation, that forgiveness is right there. For those who persist in living for evil, in the end we leave them in God's hands. Do we want them to repent and turn to God for forgiveness? Sure we do. Are we going to share the gospel with those who have hurt us? Sure we are. Can we trust that God is going to make the right judgement? Sure we can; he's had a lot of experience. He knows what he's doing. In our lives we'll have enemies that repent and turn to the gospel, and maybe we'll have some that don't, but either way we can trust that God is the one with the power, and he uses that power for the sake of his children.

I'm not saying we don't try to work proper justice here on earth; of course we work to make sure the guilty are punished and the innocent are protected. But in times when it seems like evil is escaping justice, when it seems like our fears are too strong to fight, we remind ourselves that the true judge is still on His throne, and none of these things escape His sight.

I guess you could say in life, there are 2, or maybe three directions we can look in. One is to look just around us. We look at our problems, at our worries, at our struggles, and we will always feel overwhelmed by them. We could I guess in a sense, look down. Meaning, we're looking at our sin, looking at judgement, looking with fear at gehenna. But Jesus tells us to look up, to the holy one, on his throne. He's the one we put our trust in. And take this to heart as I say this, we can only look in one direction at a time. There are animals that have eyes on the sides of their heads, they can look all around at the same time. Our eyes are in the front, we can only focus on one direction at a time, but we have depth perception, we can tell how far away we are from that thing. I think there's a metaphor in that somewhere, so take it to heart.

One last thought, and I'm done, I promise. I just want to look one last time at the fear of the Lord and wisdom. Notice, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The beginning, not the end. It's where we need to start in our walk with God, because it's what shows us that we need a savior. Jesus starts us there, but he doesn't leave us there. As it says in 1 John 4:18-"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." If you find yourself overwhelmed by your fears and your worries, if you find that you just can't feel thankful in life, maybe it's time to look up. Put all your fear in God first, be afraid of him, as strange as that sounds. And confess, confess your sins, your fears, your struggles before God, and then let his mercy and forgiveness overwhelm you. Watch his perfect love start removing the fears and anxieties bit

by bit in your life. Let his forgiveness fill you with thankfulness, as bit by bit he transforms your life. Because when we really understand what we've been saved from, and what we've been brought into, that's a radical thing. In the end, we don't fear because we know we're in God's hands. He's powerful, more powerful than everything we'll ever face. He sees even the minor details in our lives, and for our sakes worked out our salvation. So seek him first, and let Him take care of the rest.

Certain as the sun

Rising in the east

Tale as old as time,

song as old as rhyme, beauty and the beast.

Lara: I'm sure we're all familiar with the classic tale, a selfish, arrogant prince is transformed into a terrifying monster after being cursed by a woman he refused to help. His outer appearance now reflected his ugly inner character, and he would remain this way until he actually learned to love someone other than himself. When he first encounters young Belle at the beginning of our story, he is bitter, resentful, and there seems to be little hope that he will break the curse before he runs out of time. Yet his character slowly changes over the course of the story as he and Belle fall in love, until finally the curse is broken as his inner character transforms. No longer the self-centered prince, he's now willing to risk his life for the sake of those he loves.

Matt: The difference between outer appearance and inner character is an important theme in the sermon on the mount. Jesus contrasts the lives of those who are only concerned with what other people think of them with the lives who are concerned with walking in step with God.

Lara: Now of course, we all want to have good reputations; we want to be trustworthy, honest, reliable, and respected. But Jesus reminds us that sometimes living righteously will make other people hate us; particularly people who love evil. The sermon on the mount is about fixing our hearts on the things that matter, and not settling for just the superficial righteousness that we often see around us. For instance, you'll encounter people who insist that it's good enough to just love the people who love you, but you don't have to worry about the people who hate you. And as long as you don't physically attack someone else, you're fine, that's all you need. But Jesus tells us that even just harboring anger in our hearts is sinful, even if it's anger directed against our enemies.

Matt: Now, there is such a thing as righteous anger; we should hate what is evil and cling to what is good, but we're also commanded to love our enemies, and pray that they repent from evil. This requires an inner character that delights more in seeing mercy and salvation than it does in seeing judgment and condemnation. Another point Jesus makes is about marriage and purity. He challenges us by saying that purity isn't just about what you do, but what you're looking at and thinking about. Even just looking at someone lustfully is the same as committing adultery, because it's a heart issue. And marriage; that's for keeps. You're making a promise to stay faithful to someone no matter what; rich or poor, sickness or health,

Lara: I think we have the sickness part down.

Matt: and you don't give up on each other just because things get tough. This is drastically different than what we see in the world around us today, where sexual immorality is celebrated, and faithfulness is seen as outdated and impractical for the modern person, who puts they're own well-being and satisfaction first.

Lara: Jesus also challenges us to do the right thing even when no one is looking. We do want to be a light to the world, so we want other people to see our good deeds to a certain extent, but we don't want our goal to be to draw attention to ourselves. Sometimes that even means doing good things in

secret, so no one but God sees you do them. Jesus challenges us to donate without telling anyone about it, and to pray in our own private place when no one is looking.

Matt: By doing that, we know we aren't just doing it for show, but because we really want to follow God. Contrast that with people around us, who make big donations so they can have their names on the sides of buildings, or make a big show of their righteous acts so people will admire them. Admiration is great, but if that's what we're chasing after, we're going to be left feeling empty.

Lara: One of the last points Jesus touches on in this sermon is to not be judgmental. This doesn't mean that we don't make judgments and act in wisdom, but rather that we don't look down on other people. We need to remember that everything we have is ultimately from God, so we shouldn't let pride consume us. Humility is probably one of the most neglected virtues out there, and something that we need to remind ourselves to practice every day.

Matt: And ultimately that was the beast's problem from Beauty and the Beast. It was his pride, his attitude of looking down on other people, that caused him to be cursed. The story reminds us that an ugly inner character will eventually show on the surface, and cause other people to shun you. The solution to that is first recognizing that we're wrong; that we've sinned in our hearts and we need forgiveness. And that transformation, that's what God offers us in Christ. So as we keep going through the book of Matthew, remember that Jesus is calling each of us to follow him as our King, so he can lead us down the path of righteousness.

Tale as old as time (ooh-ooh)  
Tune as old as song  
Bittersweet and strange  
Finding you can change  
Learning you were wrong

Certain as the sun

Rising in the east

Tale as old as time,

song as old as rhyme, beauty and the beast.

It's the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, and Isaiah's ministry is just getting started. The Jewish people have been drifting away from God for quite a while now, and they're starting to suffer for it. As enemy nations get stronger around them, the Jewish people even end up fighting themselves. Things are getting worse, yet they still don't see that their problem is that they've turned away from God. As a result, God's judgement is coming, in a very interesting way. Take a look at Isaiah's warning in Isaiah 3, verses 1 to 5.

### **Isaiah 3:1-5**

See now, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah both supply and support: all supplies of food and all supplies of water, the hero and the warrior, the judge and the prophet, the diviner and the elder, the captain of fifty and the man of rank, the counselor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter. I will make mere youths their officials; children will rule over them. People will oppress each other— man against man, neighbor against neighbor. The young will rise up against the old, the nobody against the honored.

God's punishment for the nation is to take away all their intelligent, qualified leaders. Instead, young people, people unqualified, immature, irresponsible, they're going to be the ones who end up leading the country, and they're going to do a terrible job of it. In some cases their leaders might literally be children, and maybe for others they're just acting like children. If the Jewish people are going to be foolish and wicked in the things they do, God's going to give them over entirely to their own foolishness, and won't be helping them anymore.

This is something we should really think about. When we become arrogant, and turn away from God, we often find ourselves being led by influences that send us in bad directions. And when a whole society does that, they don't want to have righteous leaders with integrity. They want leaders who cater to their desires, who tell them things they want to hear, no matter how foolish. Young people turn away from the wisdom of those who are older than them, despising their advice and bringing harm upon themselves. God's punishment for a foolish people is to give them exactly what they want. He takes away his support from the people, and allows the fools to be the ones in charge.

We might be seeing a bit of that around us today. Maybe you look at some of our leaders, our celebrities, our important people, and think to yourself "How in the world could someone so foolish become so important?" If we spend too much time focusing on them, we might get discouraged and wonder what we're supposed to do. Are the foolish leaders going to end up destroying everything?

But take a look at what Isaiah says later, in verses 10 and 11

Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done.

Isaiah gives some encouragement to us. Even when a country is falling apart, with fools and children in charge, we can focus on doing what's right, to be righteous in a land that might have a lot of wickedness. And God has a way of bringing his people through such difficult times. It's like the line in Psalm 91:7-8



A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

Even when disaster strikes, God protects those who have put their trust in him. That was Isaiah's encouragement to those who were wondering if it was worth it to stay loyal to God during his time, and it's his encouragement to us too. So don't be discouraged, even when it feels like foolishness and wickedness is all around. In the end, God will see us through it.

We're continuing to look at the prophet Isaiah, and this week we find the nation of Judah in a difficult situation. Up to this point they've had a pretty good streak of good kings trying to lead the people back to God, but now King Ahaz rises to power, and he starts undoing all the good progress Uzziah and Jotham made. The people of Judah start turning away from God, start getting weaker, and now the northern kingdom of Israel and the nation of Aram decided to take advantage of their weakness and team up to attack Judah. With two nations against one, the situation looks bad, but God sends Isaiah to king Ahaz to tell him that these two nations won't succeed in defeating Judah. God will protect them. What follows is one of the most famous interactions Isaiah has with any king, in Isaiah 7:10-12

<sup>10</sup> Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, <sup>11</sup> "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."

<sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."

God is ready to prove through a miraculous sign that He will protect the nation of Judah, but Ahaz doesn't want to have anything to do with it. You see, Ahaz already has a plan in the back of his mind, he's going to reach out to the dangerous and violent nation of Assyria, and try to enlist their help in fighting Israel and Aram. With Judah to their south and Assyria to their north, the enemy would be forced to fight on two fronts, and wouldn't be strong enough to win.

God, however, does not approve of the plan, and what follows is one of the most famous prophecies in the entire Bible. Isaiah 7:13-17

<sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, <sup>16</sup> for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. <sup>17</sup> The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria."

Ahaz doesn't want to ask God for a sign, so God himself decides on the sign, a virgin will give birth to a son, and before the child is old enough to know the difference between good and bad, both Israel and Aram will be defeated. Unfortunately, it won't stop there; Assyria is going to keep pressing on to attack Judah as well. Ahaz has just kicked a hornets' nest.

We often hear this passage read during the Christmas season, thinking about Mary giving birth to Jesus, but there's a little more to this prophecy than that. If we keep reading, we see Isaiah and his wife have a baby boy in chapter 8, and God says that before the boy is old enough to talk Assyria will crush both Israel and Aram. There's a connection between Isaiah's child in chapter 8 and this prophecy in chapter 7.

However, there's still something more to come. There's nothing particularly miraculous about a husband and wife having another child, it's pretty common, so what is God saying here when He mentions a virgin giving birth? This child Isaiah has, the destruction of the nations trying to attack Judah, these are all foreshadowing something greater yet to come. This prophecy isn't just for Ahaz, he's not even paying attention to it, this prophesy is for us, to know that there will be a virgin to come

that will have a child that will mark victory for each of us. Just as Judah was saved from Israel and Aram, and eventually from Assyria as well, this child to come means salvation for us, not from a country, but from sin itself. As we go in to this Christmas season, let's reflect on all of the history that led up to this great moment, the coming of Jesus who would pay the ultimate price for our sins.

In Isaiah chapter 7, we saw Isaiah give a prophecy about a child to come that would be a sign of God's deliverance. While the son Isaiah has in chapter 8 seems to be a part of that sign, it doesn't quite seem to be the complete fulfillment of it. Then we get to chapter 9, where we see more details about this child to come and what he will accomplish.

**9** Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

<sup>2</sup> The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. <sup>3</sup> You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. <sup>4</sup> For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

<sup>5</sup> Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

This isn't an ordinary kid. Notice the titles he's given, Wonderful counselor, everlasting father, prince of peace. Interestingly, we see all parts of the trinity here. Jesus often referred to the holy spirit as the counselor. We often call Jesus the prince of peace. And then there's the father God in heaven. All of these titles are given to the same God, three persons, but one God, who will rule over an everlasting kingdom.

We see Jesus talk about this kingdom to Pilate after he was arrested, when Pilate asks him if he's a king.

John 18

<sup>36</sup> Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

<sup>37</sup> "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

One of the things we need to remember as Christians is that our citizenship ultimately isn't in this world. We'll see countries come and go, civilizations rise and fall, but we belong to something that will outlast all of it. It can be easy for us to get so caught up in our day to day problems that we forget that. Exams coming up, work we need to do... sickness and hardships we face that seem to be more than we can bear. The message of Christmas isn't about a little baby in a manger, it's about a savior who died so we would have eternal life and a place in this kingdom that will never end. And it's God's zeal that accomplishes this, not our own righteousness or good works.

I know the last two years have been pretty rough. A lot of people so focused on the problems of this world, they never look up to see the hope Jesus offers. We need to make a conscious effort not to make that same mistake. I can tell you, going through this cancer this year, it can be easy for me to get so focused on the pain and the danger that I forget the eternal hope that we have. I don't know everything the future holds, there's a lot of uncertainty, but I do know that Jesus promises a place in his kingdom for all who have put their trust in him, and there's nothing in this world that can take that away. So let's not forget, no matter what challenges we face, the same power that rose Jesus from the dead is at work in us, and leads us into life everlasting. This Christmas, let's remember that we have an eternal king, and an eternal kingdom we belong to.

## Devotional 1 – Bitterness

### Read Hebrews 12:12-15

“Everything is against me!” Have you ever felt like that? I know I sure have; in moments of despair and hopelessness, I’ve sometimes found myself believing that the whole universe is somehow working against me. We saw Jacob responding this way when he learns that Simon is being held prisoner in Egypt, and the governor there is demanding that Benjamin be brought to secure his release. In this moment, all of the pain of Jacob’s past: his conflicts with his brother, his conflicts with his uncle, the loss of Joseph, are all coming back to him. He’s given into bitterness.

This passage in Hebrews warns us to not let bitterness take root in us, because it cuts us off from the peace of God. We may have pain from our past, but that will never overpower the grace of God that works in our hearts. By reflecting on the challenges God has brought us through, the victories He has given us, we can encourage ourselves when our current situation seems too difficult to handle. God has brought us this far, he won’t leave us now.

## Devotional 2 - Responsibility

### Read Genesis 43:8-9

It’s time to make a decision; stay in place and starve, or take a risk and send Benjamin with his brothers to Egypt to get grain to eat. Jacob is distraught, but Judah steps up with a promise; he will personally ensure Benjamin’s safety. With this promise, Jacob relents, and agrees to send Benjamin with them.

This is in contrast to Reuben’s promise earlier in Genesis 42:37, where he tells Jacob that he can kill both of Reuben’s sons if Reuben doesn’t bring Benjamin back safely. I’m not sure why Reuben thought a satisfactory outcome to the death of a son for Jacob would be to then kill two of his grandchildren, but needless to say Jacob doesn’t receive any encouragement from this promise. Judah, however, takes the responsibility personally.

There will be times in life when we need to step up and take responsibility for something. We can’t make any excuses or push the blame to anyone else. As scary as it is, be willing to step up in those moments, and trust that God will use you to do great things.

## Prayer Topics

God would work reconciliation in broken relationships

God would show you the work He is preparing you to accomplish

God would remind you of the victories He has given you in the past

God will help you grow into someone who will make responsible choices

# Joseph Part 5 - The Path Forward Genesis 42-43

## Genesis 28:10-22

What would you do if someone randomly came up to you and gave you a billion dollars? Completely out of the blue. You're in a bad place in life; your mistakes are catching up to you, your future is uncertain. Then someone walks in, tells you that they see your situation, and they're going to help. In a single moment, your entire life is turned around. What would you do? How would you respond?

Perhaps those stories of people who win the lottery come to mind. Suddenly a person finds themselves with hundreds of millions of dollars that they don't know what to do with, and within a year or two it's all squandered and they're back to where they were before. Or perhaps the person is so thankful for this gift they received that they do everything they can to honor the person who turned their life around. A life of gratitude for the gift or a life of selfish indulgence. How does a person respond?

**I'm sure we're all familiar** with the story of Jacob. He takes advantage of a moment when his brother Esau is hungry to get Esau to give up his birthright as the first born, and then later disguises himself as Esau to get their father to bless him. Needless to say, this trickery does not sit well with Esau, who eventually starts entertaining the idea of killing Jacob to get back at him.

**And here we find Jacob**, fleeing home under the excuse of looking for a wife. Up to this point, his life has been defined by trickery and deception, and his past decisions are finally starting catch up to him. Cut off from friends and family, no clear path forward, no idea if he'll ever be able to go home. We don't really talk about this aspect of the scene very often, because we're usually focused on God's plans and provision for Jacob, but this is a really bad place to be in life. He's even using a rock as a pillow, I mean, come on. It honestly looks pretty hopeless.

**Then we have the twist**; God shows up on the scene with a promise. Jacob, even though he was technically the second born, is going to inherit the promise of Abraham and Isaac. It would be his descendants that inherit this promised land, and it will be through his line that the world will receive the blessing of salvation. This moment may catch us a little off guard, because there really doesn't seem to be any reason Jacob should deserve this promise. As near as we can tell, neither Jacob nor Esau had been seeking God at all, or concerned with God's commands. They may have heard their father talking about God's promises, but that didn't seem to be on either of their radars at the moment.

Despite this past, despite all of Jacob's decisions, God shows up, and we see what happens when God changes a life. Even more interesting about this moment; this promise from God is unconditional. There's no, "Well, as long as you offer enough sacrifices." Or "As long as you say the right prayer" or "As long as you don't make any more major mistakes." No, just, I am God, and I'm going to be with you and I'm going to bless you. You have a future, and a good future.

There are all kinds of promises from God in the Bible, but the most powerful ones are the unconditional ones. Those promises that we didn't earn, that are just pure grace.

## Romans 5:6-10

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. **7** Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. **8** But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.



**9** Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! **10** For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

The unconditional promise given to Jacob is that his line, his descendants, would be the source of this unconditional promise for us; a salvation granted not to the perfect, not to the righteous, but to the sinner.

**As he wakes up**, Jacob realizes the full ramifications of this promise. The God of the universe is with him. How do you respond to that.

The first thing he does is set up a memorial. He sees this location as holy, and starts treating it as such. I'm not sure how much God really needed him to set up a rock as a home; I suspect the throne room of heaven is a little nicer than the rock Jacob set up, but we'll ignore that for now, but the point is Jacob realizes he needs to respond with reverence. He needs a public display demonstrating the impact God made in his life.

The second thing he does is make a promise. A promise to give back to God as God blesses him. Considering God's promise to him earlier, this is almost like writing a blank check. He has no idea how much God is going to give him, so he has no idea what a tenth of everything is going to look like, but he's committing it now. And let's be clear, Jacob is not trying to manipulate God with this promise. This is not a bribe, or some kind of a deal to give to God so that God will give to him later. This is not one of those prosperity preachers saying "God wants to bless you, you just need to be willing to give first." The promise from God has already been made, and now Jacob only has one reasonable response.

What do you give God when he steps in and changes your life? On the one hand, God doesn't really need our stuff does he? The entire world belongs to God; what could we possibly offer that can compare? Yet there's something in us that compels us to give back to the one who blessed us. We want to do something to recognize the gift we receive. And while Jacob here is talking about giving back a tenth, we as Christians know there's a lot more to the promises of God and a lot more that we need to respond with. God isn't giving a measly little country, he's giving us eternal salvation. And while we often talk about tithing in church, and what percentage of our income is appropriate to give, the reality is God doesn't just want 10% of our material wealth; he wants our whole hearts, our whole mindset.

**Take a look** at this one, a familiar story, yes?

Luke 19:1-8

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup>A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. <sup>3</sup>He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. <sup>4</sup>So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

<sup>5</sup>When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." <sup>6</sup>So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

<sup>7</sup>All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

<sup>8</sup> But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

A wealthy man who became wealthy through corruption and theft. And now as Jesus steps in and changes his life, there's only one way he can respond. His wealth, his possessions, meh, meaningless. He's going to use it all to honor Jesus, and he's going to honor Jesus by providing for those in need and paying back those he had wronged. Now everyone, when they look at Zacchaeus, will realize what a powerful impact the messiah has on a life. There will be no mistake going forward, Jesus changed the life of this man. This Jesus guy, he's the real deal.

And that's what our lives should look like when we've been touched by God. It's not about giving the right percentage of our money, or attending church the right number of days per year, or spending so many hours working on a luncheon or a food festival or something. People should look at our lives and think; wow, that is a life that has been changed by Jesus. That person; they're different; they're living by a different set of rules, they're living with a different mindset, and boy is it powerful.

For Zacchaeus, it was about seeing his moral compass completely turn around. And maybe for some of those with a past filled with sin and regret, that's what it looks like to give our lives to God. People look at them 5 or 10 even 15 years later, and say “Wow, you're not the same person you were before. What happened?”

We might also think about something like the life of Paul, who encountered God while on his way to Damascus. Paul is struck blind, then he's healed and turns to Christ.

Acts 9:20-22

At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup> All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” <sup>22</sup> Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

God touches Paul's life, and Paul responds by telling everyone he can about Jesus. And not just this day, not just this week, not just this year, but for the rest of his life, this is Paul's purpose. He dedicates his life to telling as many people as he can about the salvation Jesus offers. And in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul shares with us some of his mindset as he does this:

<sup>19</sup> Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

He was saved, and now he's dedicating his life to save as many others as he can.

We're going into the new year now, so for the next few weeks we'll be hearing about everyone's new year resolutions, right? One person will say they'll go to the gym this many times a week, another will say they'll learn a new language, maybe another will read more books. And they'll work on their

resolution for...a few weeks usually, right? And then, life gets in the way, things get busy, I don't really have time, eh, it wasn't really that important, was it? All the excuses come in. Their dedication to their goal just doesn't last. And I think there's a reason for that. Dedication really needs to come from the heart. It comes from a burning desire, a passion, to see something happen. Inner transformation needs to drive the outer conformation. And that's what God offers us. God is transforming our hearts, and our lives are conforming to his will.

People who wait until new year to make a resolution don't usually follow through with it because it's a transformation that's based on a date, not a conviction. If you were really convinced this is important, really convicted, you would start whenever you felt that conviction. You go to the doctor, he tells you that you need to exercise more and lose a little weight, and you believe him, you start there and then because you know it's important. If you can wait until the start of the new year to dedicate yourself to a particular goal for that year, it really isn't that important to you.

Yet here we are, at the start of the new year, and we each need to ask ourselves, "What am I going to be dedicating myself to this year?" But more importantly, what are we going to be dedicating our lives going forward to?

#### Psalm 95:6-8

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;

<sup>7</sup>for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Today, if you hear his voice, <sup>8</sup>"Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,<sup>[a]</sup> as you did that day at Massah<sup>[b]</sup> in the wilderness,

Hebrews actually refers to this song when talking about how we respond to the gospel. Today, if you hear his voice. Not tomorrow, not next week, not next month if you get around with it. If you know God is speaking to you, calling you, offering salvation, don't let bitterness and resentment harden your heart. Respond to the call; take it seriously. Like Jacob, we need to each make an intentional decision to dedicate our lives going forward to God. Now what that looks like can be different for each one of us. Perhaps for some it's turning away from a certain sin. For some maybe it's giving more generously. For some maybe it's doing a little more ministry, sharing the Bible with more people, teaching and discipling more. Maybe it's being more intentional in our prayer or bible reading time. But whatever it is, let it be based on the knowledge that our sins and debts have been paid for, that we have an eternal gift that can never be taken away, an unconditional promise that we have a future in that promised land.

I want to wrap up with a little story from my own life, from my 4<sup>th</sup> year at UCLA. School year was starting off, I had been a Christian for almost 2 years at this point, and I came under the conviction that video games, and electronics and such in general, had too much of a control over my life, and I needed to do something about it. So I was thinking to myself about what I wanted to cut back on, did I want to cut out video games, or maybe webcomics, or maybe social media stuff, this or that, and I eventually came to the conclusion that maybe it was good enough to just cut out video games, the other stuff was "too important"; do just a 40 day thing. 40 days without video games, and that was what I promised myself I would do. And as I started on this commitment, I realized that this was a big thing, and I should include God in this vow. So I prayed, "Lord, help me cut out video games from my life for the next 40 days." I kid you not, the very next day, my laptop died. Just bzt, wouldn't turn on. I took that as a sign

from God that maybe the other things would be good to cut out too. Of course I still used the campus computers to do work and assignment and such, but stayed away from all the electronic entertainment stuff. And you know what, turns out those things really weren't as important as I thought.

More than that, though, that year marked my greatest growth as a Christian, when I went from someone who just showed up to someone who was teaching and leading. I got plugged into campus ministry, and eventually got connected to the Chi Alpha group. Started teaching Sunday School, started being intentional about learning and sharing my faith. And it all started with a promise, to give up something that was holding me back, because I realized God was greater. So think about what your life would look like dedicated to God. What would you leave behind, what would you cling to going forward? Where does God want to take you? Jacob is here giving 10% back, but really everything is God's anyway. So let's go all out, and see where God leads us.

## Word Search

A	Q	Z	R	U	V	W	P	Y	S	M
X	B	R	O	T	H	E	R	S	A	I
F	L	E	K	D	V	C	M	P	S	D
H	Y	J	W	A	I	V	K	T	L	I
W	X	A	D	R	E	A	M	S	A	A
G	N	C	U	V	S	Q	T	P	V	N
K	H	O	M	Z	H	F	Y	G	E	I
S	D	B	S	A	E	R	T	O	R	T
U	N	X	R	F	C	K	C	L	Y	E
N	R	O	B	E	H	Z	Q	J	P	U
Q	U	Q	F	C	E	L	U	O	R	K
Z	W	A	R	O	M	B	V	W	N	F

Find the words:

Brothers

Midianite

Slavery

Jacob

Shachem

Dreams

Robe

# Genesis 37 - Origin of Joseph

## Devotional 1 - Deceit

### Read Proverbs 12:20

Sometimes we wonder if what we're planning to do is right or wrong. Some things look fairly obvious to us...selling your own brother into slavery would definitely fall into the "wrong" category if we're being honest with ourselves. Other times it isn't as clear, but this proverb gives us a little insight into how we can examine our actions. Deceit and evil go hand in hand, while joy aligns with peace. If you feel like you need to lie about something (for instance, faking your brother's death with some goat blood and a torn-up robe) it's a sign that you might not be doing the right thing. In contrast, if what you're doing results in joy and peace, if you take joy in sharing what has happened, that's a sign that you're on the right track.

This deceit and evil can hide in each of our hearts, and we really need God's help working in us to help us recognize which of our plans are good and which aren't. In your prayer time today, ask for discernment to know the right thing to do, and the strength to resist the temptation toward evil.

## Devotional 2 - Correction

### Read Proverbs 13:24

Let's be honest, we all hate being corrected. Whether it's for serious things or trivial things, we don't like being reminded that we made a mistake. However, receiving correct is extremely important in life, and you could make the case that a lot of the problems Jacob's children run in to are a result of him not ever stepping in to discipline them for doing something wrong. Whether it's Reuben's sexual immorality or Levi and Simeon's murderous rampage on an unsuspecting town, Jacob seems to be looking the other way when his children make evil choices, and that allows things to escalate to the point where they're willing to sell their own brother into slavery.

We need to condition our hearts to be willing to receive correction, maybe even seek it out from those we trust, otherwise we risk the chance of our hearts turning toward evil. In your prayer time today, ask for the grace to not be bitter when you receive discipline, and the wisdom to learn from the discipline you receive.

One of my favorite proverbs is Proverbs 16:9 “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” It’s something that we’ve definitely seen over this last year, right? All the plans we had made had to change, and we were faced with so many challenges we weren’t expecting. For some people, it’s very discouraging to realize that we don’t know the future. A lot of the anxiety we have comes from realizing that we don’t really have control over the vast majority of things that affect our lives. But there’s a reminder in this proverb, and a reminder we’re going to see in the life of Joseph; our plans may fall apart, but God is still directing things. God still has a plan for us, even if we don’t know what it is. Our steps have already been determined before we were even born; nothing is surprising God, nothing is coming as a shock to Him. And we have an additional promise in Romans 8:28 – “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” This is a promise that God uses all the things that happen in our lives, both good and bad, for our ultimate good. He doesn’t just drop us and give up during the challenging times, He continues to work in us. Maybe you’ve seen that work during this last year. Maybe your faith has grown, or your compassion for others has gotten stronger. Maybe you’ve picked up a new skill, or had a chance to spend more quality time with people you care about. Whatever it is, we can rest in the knowledge that each hardship and challenge we’ve gone through is part of God’s plan for our lives. The hardships are never fun at the time, I’m sure Joseph was pretty upset about being captured by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt, but as we follow his story we’ll see that God is bringing Joseph exactly where he needs to be, to do the job he needs to do.

We have two options when faced with the reality that we’re not the ones who are ultimately in control of our lives. We can be bitter and resentful that we don’t have everything in life that we think we want, or we can trust, trust that God sees a bigger picture than we could ever see, and is going to do good things that we might not see for many years to come, or maybe not even see until we’re in heaven with him one day. While we wait, we can use stories like Joseph’s to encourage us to stay strong during the difficult times, and look forward to the victories that we don’t see quite yet. It’s no accident that you’re here; you have a purpose, and I think his confidence in that purpose that God had revealed to him is part of what helped Joseph stay strong during all the difficulties he had to go through. So let’s follow his example, and trust that God is leading us into his purposes.

It's the hard-knock life for us  
It's the hard-knock life for us  
'Stead of treated  
We get tricked  
'Stead of kisses  
We get kicked  
It's the hard-knock life

Lara

In the classic American musical Annie, we see an orphan struggling with the sorrow of having been abandoned by her parents and living in a place that isn't really her home. She's living in a dumpy orphanage with a caretaker who isn't very caring. For all the children there, their longing is to finally find a true home. This temporary residence isn't where they really belong.

Matt

This week we were looking more at Matthew 9 and 10, and we see Jesus sending his disciples out with a warning. While up to this point, they've mostly been experiencing favor from people seeking miracles and healings from Jesus, Jesus tells them that in the future they're going to experience great persecution and rejection. Abandonment from friends and family, suffering and hardship...following Jesus was not going to be all fun and comfort.

Lara

One of the things we need to understand when following God is that we're living in a world that has largely rejected God. People may like it when Jesus is giving them free stuff, but when it comes to actually following God, people typically walk away, chasing after their own desires. So as we follow God here on earth, we find we don't really fit in. In the same way the orphans in Annie are suffering, living in a place that isn't really their home, we as Christians are living in a world we don't really belong in. We suffer because this isn't really our true home.

Matt

But how do we have joy in the midst of this suffering? There's an interesting scene in the book of Acts, where the apostles start to experience real opposition for the teachings and miracles. In chapter 5, they're threatened to stop preaching and are all flogged. Yet look how they respond in Acts 5:41-42

Acts 5:41-42 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. <sup>42</sup> Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Rather than feeling shame or depression, they feel joy, because in their suffering, they're even closer to Jesus, and even more focused on their eternal reward.



Lara - The disciples were just applying that important mandate from Annie, that you're never fully dressed without a smile.

Matt- Well, I'm not sure if that was quite the reasoning they were using in that moment, but I'm sure there's an application in there somewhere.

Lara

Indeed, God commands us to rejoice in our suffering, and the Christian hope of eternal glory allows us to do just that.

1 Peter 4:12-13 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

This suffering is doing two things. One, it's drawing us closer to Christ, because we're sharing in his suffering. We know that we belong to him, and have great confidence that he is walking through the difficulties with us. The closer we draw to Christ, the more we experience his love and grace. There's a great line in Psalm 34 about God being near the brokenhearted.

Matt

The second thing suffering does is direct our attention even more toward our heavenly home. It reminds us that this temporary world isn't where we really belong; we're looking forward to something greater. Because your suffering has placed your focus on eternal things rather than the mere temporary pleasure of this world, you finally have real and lasting hope. The kind that cannot fade.

Lara - You know in your heart that with god "the sun'll come out Tomorrow"

Matt - And that hope gives us joy today, because we know our hardships aren't for nothing. So have confidence knowing Jesus went through the same things, and he promises us a true home where we really belong.

I remember the day that marked the 5 year anniversary of finishing chemotherapy. It was a special day, because our criteria was once I was in remission for a full 5 years, I was officially cured. I had great joy as I shared with the Wednesday night Bible study group down in LA that I was officially done with that phase of my life, and a new phase had begun. In a sense, it was like passing from death into a new life.

The joy we see in these stories as people encounter this child Jesus is much the same thing; the realization that a new life has begun. No longer under the curse of death, we now see our salvation and eternal life. And really, that's what joy is. Joy isn't being happy with our situation, or getting everything we want. It doesn't depend on us being in control, or even completely understanding what is going on. But we realize one thing; a new, reborn life is now here, and we have it. It can't be taken away, it lasts for eternity. That's why we can have joy, even in the pain and in the confusion, because we know we have something far greater. The joy for hitting the mark of being 5 years cancer free was great, but even greater was the joy the night I became a follow of Jesus. And even though these shepherds and Simeon had seen some hard times, all of that was cast aside by the joy of seeing their savior. Let's focus our joy on that as well.

Apparently I know everything...

I had an amazing reaction from one of the little Sunday School kids after church today when I was explaining to her that I taught at a university.

Her – “You teach gwown ups?”

Me – “Yep, I sure do!”

Her – “But how can you teach gwown ups? Dey ahwedey know evweeting! Dat’s kwazy!”

Ah yes, kwazy indeed. It’s funny, but I’ve actually been thinking about that exchange all day. In the eyes of a little kid, we “gwown ups” know everything; we know why the sky is blue, why it gets cold in the winter, and why it’s a bad idea to just stand out in the middle of a busy street. We have the answers to everything! It’s an amazing contrast to the little advertisement I was watching on PhD comics this afternoon for “WE HAVE NO IDEA”, a book about how little we actually know about the universe.

Of course a mature, humble person realizes we don’t know everything. You could have a dozen PhD’s, centuries of wisdom and experience, and you only reach a miniscule fraction of the knowledge out there in the universe. Sadly, I find that most people don’t quite reach this realization. More often than not, the people we encounter in life convince themselves that they have it all figured out. No one can question them. No one can challenge them. Anyone who disagrees with them is a fool, and not even worth their time.

For my Palm Sunday lesson I covered a lot of the interactions between Jesus and the people in Jerusalem in the week before they had him killed, but there’s one interaction in particular that I love more than any other; the reaction to Jesus chasing the money changers out of the temple. For a little context, Jesus gets to the temple and sees all the scam artists ripping people off. Charging fees for exchanging currency, forcing people to buy overpriced animals to offer at the temple; shady stuff like that. He shouts out a verse from the Bible about making God’s temple a “den of robbers” and chases everyone away with a makeshift whip.

But the story doesn’t end there. It doesn’t take long for the priests and other religious leaders to come out and challenge Jesus. They demanded to know by what authority Jesus was doing all this. He certainly didn’t have their permission, so what gave Jesus the right to disrupt their operations at the temple? Jesus responded to their challenge with a question of his own: was John the Baptist crazy, or was he a prophet? Jesus would answer their question, but they would have to answer his first.

Now, normally these priests and teachers and legal specialists would have no problem answering questions from people. They knew their scripture inside-out, the teachings of each prophet, the sayings of ancient rabbis; no question would be too hard. These guys knew “evweeting”. The only problem

was...they ran into a little issue with John the Baptist. John had quite a few harsh words to say against many of the religious leaders at the time. Similar words that Jesus had, in fact. Both John and Jesus had a tendency of exposing the hypocrisy and immoral behavior found within the religious elite at the time, and the general population loved them both for it. As a result, the “all-knowing” religious elite couldn’t really challenge either John or Jesus directly; they just had to patiently endure it in the hopes that at some point these guys would get on the bad side of the Roman government and get arrested.

But now they were stuck with this question; a question they couldn’t answer. If they said John wasn’t a prophet, the people on the crowd would instantly turn on them because most of them loved John (even years after Herod had his head chopped off). If they admitted John was a prophet, however, they were also sunk, because they had clearly rejected John’s overall message and direct support of Jesus. So the smartest legal experts in the town were left with only one safe response: “We have no idea.”

This wasn’t an admission of humility, however. They weren’t taking the position that they were mere men who had things to learn. They were simply protecting their reputations from harm; they were concerned with how the outer world saw them. And their reputation was: We know everything. Their authority couldn’t be challenged, and no one knew more about God and the scriptures than they did. They spent the rest of the week trying to trap Jesus with trick questions, and after Jesus had stumped them at every turn, they finally resorted to capturing him when he was alone and turning him over to the Roman governor to be killed. Never, at any point in the course of events, did they ever ask themselves the question: “Could we actually learn something from Jesus?”

Most people hate being told their wrong. A few wise people enjoy being corrected, but I’d wager a guess that a very small percentage of folks fall into that category. Once we get to a certain place in life, we start acting like we “ahwedy know evweeting”. In my opinion, nowhere is that better demonstrated than the petty partisan politics I see in the news and on my Facebook feed. People, friends and family, are either “libtards” or “racist fascist idiots” or whatever political/religious slur you run into. Few people dare step foot out of their theological or political echo chambers, and when they do it’s only to insult the people who are of different opinion. And as I’ve argued on multiple occasions in the past, it’s apparent that we live in a society that has wholly rejected Jesus’ teachings. The ravings of a lunatic Jewish carpenter from 2000 years ago have no place in modern society; a society that values instant gratification and Tomahawk missiles and little pieces of green cotton-paper with pictures of dead presidents on them.

A proverb comes to mind; after a list of all the reasons why “fools” (a complicated word in the Hebrew that involves more than just being stupid) are just hopeless people who can’t do anything right, Proverbs 26:12 in the Bible says: “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”

As we celebrate the week that Jesus was crucified and resurrected with chocolate bunnies and plastic eggs, I encourage you to take a few hours out of the week to actually read some of the things he taught. Read through the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5-7. It'll take you like 20-30 minutes tops. Read through Jesus' final teachings to his disciples as they ate dinner on his last night with him before his death: John 13 and 14. It's only a few pages long. You don't even need to have a Bible; everything is on the internet these days anyway. Whatever you believe about Jesus, there's no denying that his life literally split history in two, and he left behind teachings that rocked the world. For just one week, let's stop making excuses like the ancient religious elite did, stop pretending that we "ahwedy know evweeting", and let us ask the question: "Could we actually learn something from Jesus?"

I may have a PhD in chemical engineering, but I know without question that I still have a lot to learn.

## Read Mark Passage

Honored to be able to share from God's word today. Title of the sermon is Seeing with the Right Lens. Of course, you have a PhD in Chemical Engineering preaching, of course it's going to be a little nerdy. I use microscopes in my classroom, ok? Want to see something cool?

Some crystals under a microscope. Nothing too special with this lens and filter. They could look like a lot of other crystals, might not be able to tell they're cholesterol.

But check this out; instead of the normal lens and filter, we use a polarizing microscope. Looks a lot cooler, huh? And now we can tell they're cholesterol crystals because they're rotating the angle of the light. See, you need the right lens. If you're not using the right lens, if you're not using the right filter, you could miss something crucial.

Or say your camera isn't quite at the right angle. You don't quite have the right focus. Is it passing interference or not? Ok, it's CACC, I need to have some sports analogy in here somewhere, right? Pretty sure that's somewhere in the bylaws; sermons must include reference to football.

The point is if you don't have the right lens, the right angle, the right focus, you can easily miss something vital. We use a different lens or a different filter or a different angle to block out other things, so we can focus on the thing we need to see.

So let's talk spiritual lens. There are physical lens we use when we see everything around us, but we also each have a spiritual lens. When people looked at Jesus, as he was going through his ministry, they were all looking through a certain spiritual lens. And we do to.

What do you see when you look at Jesus? What do you see when you read the Bible? What's your lens?

We've been going through the Book of Mark in our junior high Sunday school class downstairs, looking at Jesus' ministry and the things that were happening back then. We're getting up to Mark 11 now, and I thought it'd be fun to give you all a little peek into what we're studying. Here in Chapter 11, Jesus is getting into Jerusalem for the last time. We have the whole palm Sunday, Hosanna, blessed is this really great guy with the donkey and the palm branches and everything, and then Jesus walks right in and start flipping tables. It's everyone's favorite part, right? He has the whip, he's just whipping people and chasing them out. But what's happening here, what did Jesus walk in on? He's going after people that had set up business in the temple. I trust most of you know this story, you know a little of what is going on, but for those of you who don't, this had to do with the sacrifices being offered at the temple. You know people would come to the temple to offer sacrifices, but it can be kind of inconvenient to bring an animal all the way to the temple from wherever it was people we coming from. They came from all over the world, right? Long way to bring a little bird, or a lamb or something. So they were selling some sacrifices at the temple; just show up and buy one problem solved. But people coming from all over the world had different kinds of currency, right? Well it's hard to sell stuff when everyone uses a different currency, so they had money changers there, who could convert everything into temple currency. Seems like it actually got to the point where people were practically running banks there out of the temple; people were depositing money and leaving it there, you had large sums of money being exchanged, it was a great business. And it kept things running smoothly. From the perspective of the religious leaders at the time, this seemed like an awesome idea. They made good money from it, and

the temple ran smoothly. Jesus...he didn't think so. This didn't seem awesome to him. He was looking at it not from a worldly perspective, but a kingdom perspective

The religious leaders were looking at the temple thinking "How can we make money? How can we balance our budget? How do we make this nice and easy?" Jesus was looking through a different lens though. The kingdom lens doesn't ask "How do we make money" It asks "How can we bring people closer to God?" And thus begins our final conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. Today, we're going to look at three key questions Jesus was challenged with in this last week of his ministry, and what these questions can teach us about the different lenses we might use to look at ministry and look at church.

We already read the first challenge; by what authority are you doing these things? These religious leaders are trying to get Jesus to stop this disruptive behavior, and their first attempt is to try to remove any authority from him. They really saw two sources of authority in the area; political authority from Rome, and religious authority that came from them. The goal of this question is to try to show the people that Jesus had no recognized authority to chase out these businesses, no matter how much the people liked it. These guys, not Jesus, were the authority on matters of the temple.

Jesus has a very interesting response. Jesus actually gives them an opportunity to demonstrate their authority before the people. They claimed to be the authority, right? Here's their chance to prove it. John the Baptist, was his message from God, or was it from men? Basically, Jesus is asking them; was John a prophet, or was he a lunatic? Was he crazy? There are no other options here. The guy was going out into the middle of the desert, wearing camel's hair, eating locusts, and dunking people in the water. If you're doing that, you're either a prophet, or you need to be committed. So simple question for the religious authorities, the religious experts, was John thumbs up or thumbs down.

Notice their discussion of the question. They aren't looking at this question from the perspective of "what is true" are they? Their entire perspective is, what happens to our reputation if we answer one way or another. What will people think of us? What will people think of me. If I say John is a prophet, then I'm criticized for rejecting him. If I say he's crazy, this crowd over here, I could get in a lot of trouble with them, because they really liked him. It's really easy to lose sight of the truth when we focus on what's popular, isn't it? When our priority is our reputation, truth is one of the first things to go out the window. Every time. And in front of everyone, they're forced to reveal that they really have no authority at all. After everything John had said and done, they couldn't say whether or not his message was true.

Now the race is on! Someone has to take this Jesus down a peg. We can't have Passover starting with Jesus flipping over everyone's tables. This is major money season. Read what happens next.

Oh Jesus, you're such a great guy, so awesome. Does anyone fall for that kind of flattering? It's obvious what they're doing, right? Look at this combination, Pharisees and Herodians. Some of you might not know, this is a really unusual combination. These are two groups that did not get along. The Pharisees were the guys who were all about religious purity. Theologically, they were actually closer to Jesus in terms of theology than any other group at the time. Herodians were more along the lines of Roman sympathizers. Think Herod. They liked Herod, they liked Roman rule....Pharisees...eh, not so much. More conflict there than agreement. But they both agreed, we want to get this Jesus guy out of here. He's getting way too popular with the people. So they ask a trap question.

If Jesus says, yes, pay taxes, the Pharisees are going to go to the people and say: “Look at this Jesus guy, he’s supporting Rome! He wants us to pay taxes to this pagan empire, why should we trust him?” And nobody likes paying taxes, right? All those forms, the W2s, the 1099s the T1000s the blue32s; ok I’m not an accountant, I’m pretty sure I made some of those up, but that’s not the point. The point is, if Jesus answers yes, the Pharisees are going to discredit him. If he says no, don’t pay taxes, the Herodians are going to report him to Rome, and he’ll be arrested for rebellion. Simple.

Look at Jesus’ response.

Bring me a denarius. Pretty cool huh? Would have had a picture of him on it, some fancy titles for him, maybe somewhat blasphemous titles, they had a tendency of lifting Roman emperors up to godhood, and they sell them on ebay now, apparently. \*hold up dollar\* who’s portrait, and who’s inscription?

What’s the lens they’re asking the question from? Why don’t we want to pay taxes. Hey, it’s my money, right? What’s mine is mine, I don’t want to let someone else have my money. But what is money to Jesus? Worldly treasures don’t last. Tiberius wants a bunch of coins with his face on them? Fine. Give them to him. He’s not taking them with him to heaven. Right? All the silver and gold in the world won’t save him. Let the greedy have their wealth, because we have something greater. Something eternal, that won’t fade; it can’t be stolen, it won’t rust. Do you believe it? Do you believe you have a treasure that will last through eternity?

Ok, last challenge, are you ready? Read. This is classic gotcha question from the Sadducees.

The Sadducees were looking at God through a very limited lens. They didn’t believe in anything more than what you see. They put God in a box. God is limited to what we can understand.

So a little bit about the theology of the Sadducees. No heaven, no afterlife, nothing after you die. It’s like that John Lenon song; imagine there’s no heaven. It’s easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today. Well we don’t have to imagine. When people don’t believe in heaven or hell, this is what you get; you get a Sadducee. There weren’t that many of them, but they held quite a bit of wealth and power, because that’s what they were concerned with. The here and now. They rejected most of the Old Testament; they only believed the first 5 books of the Bible. They were primarily focused on the temple administration, the High Priest tended to come from their ranks, so all those tables Jesus was flipping over; that was their jurisdiction. That temple admin stuff was all Sadducees. And here they’re trying to prove to Jesus that there is no heaven. They are trying to prove to the Son of God, who came down from heaven, that there is no heaven. Let that sink in for a moment.

Look at how Jesus responds: Read

They’re in error because they don’t know the scripture, and they don’t understand just how powerful God is. They don’t know the scripture; they throw most of it out, and what little they do keep they still don’t understand. God is not limited to our expectations, is He? But look at the verse Jesus quotes; he quotes from Exodus here. That’s one of the books the Sadducees do accept as scripture. Jesus points to God’s words, as proof that death is not the end. “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” Not “I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” I am. I was, and I still am, because they still are. That’s Jesus’ argument here; God is referring to these ancient patriarchs as people who are still alive, which means death isn’t the end.



So what are the lens we're looking at in these questions? Do you evaluate things based on what's popular, or based on what you are convinced is true? Is your life centered on the material things or the eternal things? Do you walk by faith or by sight? And I want to make something clear here; there is nothing wrong with asking questions. The problem with these leaders was not that they were asking questions; the problem is they weren't looking for answers. Some people think that religion means blind faith; we never question anything, never test anything, just accept it all as true. But Jesus answered questions. He may have criticized the disciples for their lack of faith, but then he turned around and gave them a reason to believe. Jesus wouldn't have spent all his time teaching and doing miracles if he didn't want us to go to him with our questions.

So ask question. Ask us questions here. We have a lot of folks at this church who know a lot about the Bible, a lot about the history, so if you have a question ask, and don't think that makes you look foolish or doubtful. We're here to seek the truth together.

Ok...now's the really hard part. Some of you might not like what I have to say here, but I can't finish this sermon without zeroing in on one key thing. The Sadducees, in particular, lost sight of the eternal. Their focus was entirely on worldly success. They became so obsessed with running the temple well, balancing their budgets, keeping things easy, they forgot why the temple was there in the first place. Instead of a house of prayer, it was a house devoted to profit. Whenever your focus is on worldly success, without fail your worship will die. It probably started with good intentions. Most things do. But in the end, they focused so much on running a great market, they stopped bringing people closer to God. They forgot why they were there in the first place.

Calvary Church. Why are we here? Are we here just to keep the lights running and the utilities paid for the building? As long as we balance our budget every year, is that a successful church? To have millions of dollars stored away in an endowment fund, never to be touched?

Are we a church if we make really good food? Have a great food festival?

Have a lot of kids coming to Sunday school, teaching the next generation about God?

Great banquets, lots of events, going from luncheon to banquet to one event to another event?

.....

What makes a church, why are we here? You see, we're not immune to the mistakes that the Sadducees made. We can make those same mistakes too. I wonder, if Jesus came by during our banquets or our food festival, would he start flipping tables over? Ok, I don't pretend to know the answer to that question. Don't get me wrong, I'm still here, helping out with all of this. We were here yesterday prepping for food festival, went out into the neighborhood across the street and passed out fliers, we'll be setting up after church and we need some help, Who's helping after church, show of hands? Good we need you. We're going to put on a great food festival this year. But whether you believe me or not, I need to stress that this is very dangerous ground we're walking on. This is thin ice. In my time doing college ministry, I meet a lot of folks with a variety of church backgrounds. I've met a lot of people, when you talk to them about church, the thing that comes to their minds isn't prayer, it isn't Bible studies, it isn't serving the poor, or spiritual growth; it's "yeah, my church was always making me serve food at our luncheons" "My church was always just giving me work to do, they were just getting whatever they could out of me, that's why I don't want to go to church anymore" I go to our

church meetings, I sit in on our discussions, and I'm telling you, if the lens you look at your church activities through is the same lens the Pharisees and the Sadducees used; the lens of balancing budgets, making money, the lens of "this is how we've always done it, this is the tradition" rather than the lens of "where is God leading us? How are we bringing people closer to God? What is God's will?" you might be in trouble. That mindset doesn't end well. That temple is gone now, isn't it? As they were walking around the city, and the disciples were in awe of how great the temple was, Jesus told them that it would all be gone within one generation. And sure enough, less than 40 years later; it was all gone.

"My house will be a house of prayer" "Seek first the kingdom of God" "Blameless religion" I've heard a lot of you share some of your frustrations with me. You feel burnt out, you don't know where you're going, whether it work and career or stuff here at church, too much going on, juggling so many things. What if the reason we're feeling so burnt out is we've left behind the yoke that Jesus was offering us, and have taken up all these burdens and cares we really don't need to. We're selling doves and exchanging currency and holding deposits and all this work...are we taking the time to pray together? Prayer next week right, first of the month? Who's going? Are we going to be so busy getting ready for a day of selling food that we won't have time to pray for each other? Is this a house of prayer or a house of sue bureg? And I admit, I'm just as guilty in this. It's so easy for me to adjust my own lens so that I'm so busy focusing on this event or that event that I'm not there when it's time to just sit down and pray. So easy to lose our focus; to focus on the seen rather than the unseen. But let's challenge each other. Let's examine our hearts, examine our ministries. I know we're in between pastors now, and it's easy to use that as an excuse to just hit the pause button, to take a step backward rather than a step forward. That's kind of what was happening to the religious leaders back then; they were waiting for messiah. But I'm telling you, if we step forward together, if we take that kingdom lens and look at everything we do, and ask God what it is He truly desires from us, you'll be amazed at the miracles we'll see.

## Acts 15:1-6

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” <sup>2</sup>This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. <sup>3</sup>The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

<sup>5</sup>Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

<sup>6</sup>The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

“You Christians, you just pick and choose what you follow in the Bible.” Have you ever gotten that comment from someone? It usually comes up when we’re talking about living moral lives, particularly when the topic is on immorality that is popular in our culture, and the person will respond, yeah, but the Bible also says not to eat pork, but you don’t follow that. So why should I listen to the Bible when it says...insert comment here. To the Christian who isn’t prepared, it can often be difficult to know how to respond to such a challenge. And of course, this isn’t a new topic of discussion. We can see in this passage, very early on in the Christian church there was discussion on what parts of the old testament still apply to us today. We hear Jesus say in the sermon on the mount, Matthew chapter 5, that he hasn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. So, that leaves us with the question, what parts of the old testament have been fulfilled, and how do we know we’re no longer under these laws? After all, the Christian is no longer under law, but under grace.

**In the beginning**, it wasn’t that much of an issue, because all the initial Christians were coming from Judaism. They used to following Jewish customs and ceremonies, they didn’t eat pork or worship idols, so they tended to just keep doing things the way they were used to. But now, a bunch of gentiles were becoming believers, and a lot of Christians, especially the ones from Jerusalem who were pharisees up until this point, thought that you first needed to become Jewish, then become Christian. And that meant being circumcised, which was the single most important mark of being Jewish. But Paul, who spent the majority of his ministry reaching out to gentiles, and saw many gentiles filled with the holy spirit, realized that this wasn’t the way to go. Being circumcised meant you were no longer trusting in grace, but rather felt that you needed to earn salvation by following the law.

Pay close attention here, because there’s something very important in Peter’s response:

**<sup>7</sup>After much discussion**, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup>God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup>He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup>Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

**Here's Peter's logic.** He's thinking back to when he shared the gospel with the Roman centurion, Cornelius. And he realized something, the holy spirit, who all Christians received as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance when we come to faith, right, Ephesians 1:14, came on these gentiles who weren't circumcised. What does that mean? It means you don't need to be circumcised to receive the holy spirit; you don't need to be circumcised to be saved. **Then in verse 12:**

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Now we have a solid demonstration from God's own power, Christians don't need to be circumcised to be saved, because the holy spirit comes on gentiles who weren't circumcised.

**What we** have to realize is that our source of knowing what parts of the old testament still apply to us isn't just random feelings we come up on our own, or just picking the things that are convenient; our source is the Bible, it's what Jesus did and taught, what the disciples did and taught. And from that, we can see very clear divisions in the old testament law **into three parts**, the moral law, which is tied to God's character, tied to holiness, tied to Godly living, and still applies to us, then the ceremonial law, which is the part of the law that Jesus fulfilled and thus is completed for us, rituals of sacrifice and ceremonies and things like that, we don't need to complete it anymore, and lastly the civil law, which pertains specifically to the nation of Israel and has to do with the practical running of the nation. Now the ceremonial law and the civil law have principles that we can still apply today, but we don't have an obligation to follow those laws the way ancient Israel did. The moral law, in contrast, is work the Holy Spirit does in our lives, causing us to grow in holiness and a desire to please God. **And while we** don't earn our salvation by living moral lives or being good enough, God does call us to live holy lives. And we see that distinction played out next as James addresses the council meeting:

**<sup>13</sup> When they finished**, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. <sup>15</sup> The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

<sup>16</sup> "After this I will return  
and rebuild David's fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild,  
and I will restore it,

<sup>17</sup> that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,  
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,  
says the Lord, who does these things'<sup>[b]</sup>—

<sup>18</sup> things known from long ago.<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>19</sup> "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. <sup>20</sup> Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Notice here, he isn't just going off of people's experiences: he's also looking at scripture. The Bible is the ultimate authority, and here he quotes from Amos 9, which is one of the passages in the old testament that speaks of a day when the gentiles will come to faith. James is saying; look, we know from the scriptures that this time would come, when the Messiah comes, gentile nations will start

following the one true God, and we're seeing that happen. They might be thinking of other passages, like Jeremiah 9:25-26

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh—Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the wilderness in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart."

Here we see even in the Old Testament, God doesn't care about the outer appearance of circumcision, but rather the status of our hearts. They might be thinking about some of the things Jesus taught, like Mark 7:14-23

<sup>14</sup> Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. <sup>15</sup> Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them." <sup>[16]</sup>

<sup>17</sup> After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. <sup>18</sup> "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? <sup>19</sup> For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

<sup>20</sup> He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. <sup>21</sup> For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

At the time, this was very confusing to Jesus' disciples, because they were still living in a framework of finding righteousness by following the laws of Leviticus, and the law clearly indicated certain foods as unclean. So when Jesus first says this, they think he's speaking in a parable, because of course if you eat the wrong food you'd be unclean. But Jesus is perfectly clear; focus on what's coming out of your mouth, doesn't matter what's going in. Now, if you analyze the foods that were outlawed in Leviticus, there actually is quite a bit of wisdom in it. The kinds of animals, like pigs or rabbits, that were declared unclean, aren't really good sources of food for a farmer living thousands of years ago, because you would be feeding them food that you could also be feeding people with. Cows and sheep, meanwhile, will go out in a field and eat grass that can grow in areas where you can't easily plant crops to grow. So while the ancient Jewish farmers would have benefited economically by following the laws in Leviticus, Jesus wants us to know that monitoring the food you're eating isn't really the righteousness God is looking for.

Matthew 5:17-18, Jesus says

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

As Jesus is teaching, he wants us to understand that his purpose is the fulfillment of the scriptures. He's living the righteous life of following the law, because we couldn't do it. And thus the ceremonial

requirements of the law are fulfilled in him. And that changes things. This is what Jesus meant when he gave that parable on new and old wineskins.

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.<sup>17</sup> Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

Jesus’ coming, his death and resurrection, it’s changing things. The old framework of following rituals and ceremonies isn’t going to work anymore.

And Peter has such a clear statement as he’s reflecting on his ministry to Cornelius and the other gentiles with him; **why would** we burden gentiles with the requirements of the law when none of us; none of us today, and none of our ancestors, were able to follow it?

But God also calls us to holiness; we’re still called to flee from sin and run towards righteousness. Having our sins forgiven isn’t opening up some free-for-all where nothing matters and we live following every sinful passion we have. Jesus makes it very clear; he’s setting us free from sin so we can live righteously. So what does living righteously look like? **There are some** things that are pretty obvious, even to the gentiles. The apostles don’t need to tell them not to murder, or steal, or obvious things like that. But there were a lot of immoral practices that were considered normal for the gentiles at the time; particularly sexual immorality and idol worship. So in their letter, that’s what the apostles focus on. You’re not required to follow the Old Testament ceremonial law; things like circumcision or food restrictions or things like that. But living moral lives means staying away from sexual immorality, which is equally popular today in our modern culture as it was back then in ancient Roman culture. When people criticize Christian morality with things like, oh, your morality is outdated, you need to get with the times, right, you’ve heard those lines, right? The reality is our modern day culture on this issue looks just like an ancient pagan Roman community. And just like the Christian views are unpopular today, they were unpopular back then, so the apostles want to make it clear; yes, we know this is counter-cultural, but this is the righteousness Christ has called us to. **All of the issues the apostles** bring up in this letter, idol worship, sexual immorality, drinking blood, and killing animals by strangling them to eat them, would have been things that would have been considered normal in pagan society, so those are the issues they want to highlight.

And before you say, hey, isn’t the meat from strangled animals and blood thing a food restriction that Jesus said not to worry about, the drinking of blood would have been part of a lot of pagan rituals, and generally pretty unhealthy. And the restriction on how you kill the animal also touches on the ethics of killing an animal humanely to minimize its suffering. And these commands, interestingly enough, predate the laws of Moses; they go all the way back to the times of Noah when God instructed him on how to eat animals. So, these things aren’t arbitrary, but they would have made Christians look silly in the midst of a pagan society that considered all the things in this letter as normal and fun.

**So why should we as Christians** care about these things? After all, this was all stuff that was happening two thousand years ago, why do we care now? **First of all**, I think it’s important simply for Christians to be able to answer the question, why is the moral law still binding but not the ceremonial law of the old testament. As Christians, we will be asked that question, and we need to be able to answer it. **But beyond that**, this also goes to the heart of what our basis for salvation is. We’re not saved by following

the law, we're not saved by following rituals, and we need to be on guard for false teachings that try to burden us with the feeling that we need to earn our salvation through good works. We're called to live righteous lives, but it's not our good deeds that earn our way into heaven. So many people I've encountered, who live with this burden like they need to earn their way into heaven by living perfect lives. Always questioning, am I good enough, will I make the cut? Or the opposite, people who put themselves up on a pedestal thinking they're better than everyone else because they've been righteous enough to earn their way into heaven. I remember a few years ago when my old roommate Vahe was transformed. We were sitting down at the kitchen table talking theology, and I was explaining to him that we don't earn our way into heaven by doing good works; Jesus paid the price for us and we're saved by trusting in him, and you could just see the transformation happen in him. And he was on fire afterwards, it was amazing to watch.

**We also need** to remember that living righteously is often going to be counter-cultural. We're always going to be criticized for it, in the same way the early Christians were. The Apostles were very deliberate in highlighting the things believers were called to that would have made them unpopular in the pagan society they were living in, and we can find some comfort in knowing that these gentile converts handled it by God's grace, the same grace at work in us. They didn't give in to Jewish pressure to base their righteousness in following the law, and they didn't give in to pagan pressure to continue to live lives of immorality, and here we are 2000 years later following their example.

**Lastly, it highlights** the importance of studying the Bible carefully. Obviously I don't have time in such a short sermon to go step by step through everything in Old Testament law to highlight what falls under each category of moral vs ceremonial vs civil, or what principles we can pull from the ceremonial and civil laws that could be beneficial today, but ultimately the Bible itself is the authority on these things. We don't pick and choose things because they're convenient, we follow them because we trust that our creator knew what he was doing when he gave us these words.

There was a book I read a few years ago by Sean McDowell and J Warner Wallace called “So the Next Generation Will Know”. It was a really relevant topic, things we need to do to equip the next generation for the challenges we face today. I especially liked that it had sections not just for pastors and teachers, but also for parents and mentors as well, with ideas to reflect on. The opening theme verse of the book, as you can imagine, was Psalm 78:5-7

“He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.”

It’s a topic that you all know is near to my heart, working with so many different young people, and seeing the difficult things we face in society today. Of course, there’s never anything really new, it’s always the same old challenges revisiting, just packaged a little differently. So one of the things I’ve done over the years to understand how to teach and prepare the next generation is actually to study the kings of the Old Testament. In particular, the thing that interested me was what causes one generation to do a complete 180 from the previous one. You’ll have this really awesome king, just great mindset, seeking God, and then a son who turns out completely differently. Or a wicked king, who is then followed by a righteous king.

When I spoke last December, I shared some thoughts on King Jehoshaphat. As far as kings go, he was one of the best Judah ever had. During a time when the northern kingdom was being driven into evil by Ahab and Jezebel, Jehoshaphat was leading the southern kingdom closer to God, and getting rid of idol worship. Like I shared in December, this was a king with so much faith that he was willing to walk into an impossible battle, with faith that God would grant the victory. They didn’t charge into battle with swords and arrows, they went in singing songs of worship. And God granted them the victory.

You’d think that surely after a king like that, the nation would be set for great things. Surely his children would have seen his faith, seen how God rewarded him, and would have wanted the same in their own lives. And Jehoshaphat doesn’t just show favoritism to his first born; he does make Jehoram king, but also gives great gifts to his siblings and sets them up for success as well.

So Jehoram inherits the kingdom, gets himself set up as king, and the first thing he does...is...go on a murder spree and kill his own family. His own siblings. What? Seriously, how do you go from a father who follows God through impossible situations to a son who kills his own brothers without a second thought?

Sometimes it’s obvious what causes children to turn out the way they do. I remember a year or two ago, watching a video made by one of those social media moms, I guess that’s a thing. And she’s crying in this video, because she heard her daughter using bad language, and realized that the daughter learned that language from her. And it hit her, all the things that were bothering her about her kid, were things that her kid copied from her. And she’s crying on this video



because she realizes that in order to have a good influence on her daughter, she's going to be the one to have to change, and it terrified her. It's easy to complain about others, a lot harder to change yourself. And the truth is, kids will follow your example much more than they'll listen to what you say.

There are, of course, other things that influence how kids turn out. Maybe influence from friends, maybe traumatic experiences, maybe it's various role models. One of the things you realize as you're going through these different kings and generations in the Old Testament, is there really is no "once size fits all". It can be really easy to fall in to the trap of "oh, if only I had done that one thing differently". Or maybe thinking, "If only that parent, if only that teacher had done X or done Y, then the situation would have turned out entirely differently." I think back to kids that I've taught over the years, college students that I've mentored, some I've seen use the things I've taught them, and some I've seen turn away from them. You think of verses like Proverbs 22:6, train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it. And yeah, a lot of the time that's it. And sometimes when things don't turn out the way we hoped, it is our fault. And some times not, we can't always tell.

But as we see church attendance drop, as we see young people lose interest in the gospel and Jesus, we do have to ask ourselves if we're doing something wrong. And that brings us back to Jehoshaphat. There's a little hint we might find in our passage about what might have gone wrong, and it shows up in verse 6. Jehoram walked in the way of the house of Ahab, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. Hold on, wait a second. Ahab and Jezebel, they were bad news, they were about as evil as evil can get, to the point that even today their names tend to be synonymous with evil. Why in the world is their daughter marrying Jehoshaphat's son?

And that's where we start to see a little of what's going on here. Let's flip just a few chapters earlier, chapter 18. Now Jehoshaphat had great riches and honor, and he made a marriage alliance with Ahab. <sup>2</sup> After some years he went down to Ahab in Samaria. And Ahab killed an abundance of sheep and oxen for him and for the people who were with him, and induced him to go up against Ramoth-gilead. <sup>3</sup> Ahab king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat king of Judah, "Will you go with me to Ramoth-gilead?" He answered him, "I am as you are, my people as your people. We will be with you in the war."

Ah ha. Now, Jehoshaphat had some things right here. My people as your people, yeah, they were all Israelites. And God does want to see his people united. Jehoshaphat has that same heart, he doesn't want to see the descendants of Jacob fighting with each other. But he also missed something crucial.

2 Corinthians 6:14 - Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

Matthew 3:9 - And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

Jehoshaphat wanted something good, but he set himself up for some serious problems here. Just because someone is a biological descendant of Abraham doesn't mean we can make an alliance...to truly be a descendant is to be someone of faith. And we need to be careful, because we can make the same mistake. Ok now, I might get in trouble for saying this in some churches, but I think I can get away with saying it here. Now don't get me wrong, I have friends in all kinds of Christian denominations. Just had my Chi Alpha friends here this week, the team I go to Haiti with. They're all on the Pentecostal, charismatic end of the theology spectrum, and we have a lot of theological differences, but we're all united on what counts. But I think a lot of Christians today, especially in Armenian circles, are willing to compromise on the essential points of the gospel in the name of trying to keep unity among Armenians. Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant...there were reasons these groups split off. Theological reasons...things that had to do with essential elements of the gospel. There was a reason Martin Luther was excommunicated, and it wasn't because he was a bully. The pope claimed that he had the ability to forgive sins, and he'd forgive the sins of your relatives in purgatory if you just gave him enough money. That's not the gospel; that's evil, greedy manipulation. And when Luther called them out on it, they had to get rid of him.

I'm not saying be mean and pick fights with churches that aren't evangelical...I'm saying be very careful where you make alliances, because the next generation is watching, and when they see you compromise, they'll start to wonder if you take any of this seriously at all. And if you're not taking this seriously, why should they? A huge reason why kids turn away from the gospel...they see their parents and teachers **don't really take it seriously**. For a lot of people, especially in our Armenian circles, church becomes more of a social club than a place of worship. People dress nice, show up a few times a month, maybe just a few times a year, enjoy some coffee, complain that the organ was a little too loud or the sermon went 1.3 minutes too long, and go home without thinking about it. All too often, we see people in churches around the US with the idea that they want just enough Jesus to get into heaven and have all the happy things they want in life, but not so much that they have to really give anything up or change their lives.

**There was a funny** Babylon Bee headline a few years back, Christian satire website, headline is "After 12 years of quarterly church attendance, parents shocked by daughter's lack of faith". It's not real, this is satire, but the parents in their story say, they're shocked to discover that going to church once every three months, whenever they didn't have something more important going on, wasn't enough to keep their children interested in their "strong quarterly commitment to the faith" when they're older. It's a joke, but that can be something that happens when churches become more of a social club than a place where we proclaim salvation. The truth is, kids don't need a social club. They'll have plenty of social clubs with their own friends. What they need is the life that Jesus offers. The power of the one who died on the cross for their sins.

Now look, Jehoshaphat, he had strong faith. He wasn't letting Ahab dictate his theology. When the time to go into battle comes, Ahab is consulting his own prophets, and Jehoshaphat says "No, we need a prophet of the real God". Ahab complains, ah that Micaiah guy, he never says nice things about me. Jehoshaphat insists, they bring Micaiah in. Now, here's the funny thing. Micaiah tells them they're going to lose, and that Ahab is going to die in this battle. So what do they do? They go into battle anyway. The plan is for Ahab to disguise himself, and Jehoshaphat would stay dressed in his royal robes. I...don't really understand the logic here, I'll be honest.

Now look, I'm sure Jehoshaphat had good reasons for going into battle. Maybe he figured, "Hey, maybe Ahab's going to die, but I'll be fine." And that's true, God did protect him. But if you're going into battle with a guy who's doing everything he can to make you the target of the enemy...maybe he's not the best guy to make an alliance with. Either way, Ahab dies, and Jehoshaphat walks away fine. His faith was strong enough to stand through this alliance. Unfortunately, the faith of his son wasn't. I imagine he's looking at his dad thinking, "Well, if Dad doesn't care about what God says, why should I?"

And see, that's the thing right there. We may have our church practices that work fine for us, my faith stays strong, I can handle making a temporary deal with someone who doesn't have my same commitment to God. Maybe I enjoy a particular ritual that's lost a lot of its meaning. But the next generation is watching. They're watching to see if the things you do match the things you say. One of the things Paul says in Romans 14, as he's talking about Christians who have different levels of faith:

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

He wants Christians to think carefully about how our example impacts other believers. Rather than looking down on other believers who don't have as strong of a faith, we should regulate our actions to make sure we're building up the faith of others. I love how in the book "So the Next Generation Will Know" they mention that parents change a lot of their behaviors for their kids. You don't watch super violent horror movies with your 4 year old, you watch PAW Patrol, right? The examples Paul gives are believers who are worried about what their eating, or celebrating certain holidays. Paul says, Look, these aren't essential things. There are essential things. Things like knowing Jesus died and rose again, paying the price for our sins. But for those who are young in their faith, let's not mess them up by trying to push them through something that's beyond their faith too quickly. There will be a day when kids grow out of PAW Patrol, but until then, Paw Patrol is on a roll!

I...remember reading an article, years back, in a Christian magazine. It was written by someone who had been in something like a focus group, put on by their church leaders. The church leadership wanted to ask these young people why people their age just didn't seem interested in church these days. And the group brought up some important things. They saw hypocrisy in the church. They felt the church was more interested in the rituals than the mission of the

gospel. They were focused more on putting events on for themselves than serving others. And young people, they just didn't feel included. For a lot of people, church always seems like it's their parents' church, and never their church, you know what I mean? And of course it's understandable, you don't put a 6 year old on the church council unless you want every Sunday to be icecream day, but at some point young people grow in faith and maturity and they're ready for leadership roles.

The sad thing was, at the end of this focus group meeting, after getting all this input, the leaders said, "So what you're saying is you want more modern music and relevant pop culture." And the young people there, they were just shocked, and realized **no one had been** listening to them. You know, one of the things I tell people who teach Sunday school, who mentor young people, is "Don't expect them to pay attention to you during the lesson when you're not paying attention to them outside of the lesson." There's a real hunger for authentic churches out there, churches that take the gospel seriously. That take the command to go and make disciples seriously. Churches that will listen to the questions and challenges people have. And young people, they have real questions that they want real answers to. **Think of what Peter** says in 1 Peter 3:15

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

Why do you believe it? Are you ready to answer the question? I know...a lot of people, in our Armenian evangelical circles, who are really quick with the negative stories. Oh, things were so bad when I was young. Oh, that one person, I can't believe that thing they said about me 15 years ago. How many people are ready to tell the stories of how God rescued them? The day they found salvation? The day they learned that God's promises stand true, even in our weakness. Young people are listening, they're hearing your stories. What are the stories they're going to walk away with?

**Now, like I said earlier**, I don't want you guys to think that I'm saying there's some one size fits all thing to this. There's a lot that goes into raising up the next generation with the gospel as their foundation. It takes the family, and it takes the church. It takes people being willing to invest their time, and make sacrifices. And Satan, he's doing his thing too, he's looking for opportunities to undercut us and mess up the work we're called to do. I'm not sharing these thoughts so we'll go around pointing fingers and blaming this or that if. Oh, if they just went to church more often, if they just memorized more Bible verses. This instead is about self-reflection, and a call to action. To pray, and take the time to connect with younger believers and share your own walk with them. Of course I don't have time to go through a whole book in a sermon, but there's a lot of great stuff in here if anyone wants to borrow it and check it out. It hits a lot of very relevant topics for teachers and parents and youth alike, and some great challenges. Things to do, tools to answer questions, traps to watch out for. Because at the end of the day, if we want this church to be around for the next generation, we have to be intentional. We're in a battle, and souls are on the line.

And, one last thing. Yeah, sometimes you see the next generation completely fall away in the Old Testament...but sometimes you see the opposite. King Josiah. His dad was pretty evil, didn't even last 2 years. Josiah is stuck taking over the kingdom at the age of 8 years old.

Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. <sup>2</sup> He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.

<sup>3</sup> In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols.

An eight year old kid changes the course of the nation. Don't doubt that children can do incredible things when they're equipped with the power of God. And that's why we're here, because we know God has the power to change lives, to do the impossible. But we'll have to save that story for next time. Let's pray.

And now it starts

Cain and Abel Reading

Simple prayer

There's been a lot on my heart these past few months, this sermon today I've actually been working on, probably since April, thinking about it, meditating on it. When they first asked me a few weeks ago to sub in for this Sunday, I figured it was the right time to bring this one. And then two weeks ago, after I had already decided to preach on Cain and Abel, there was that shooting at the synagogue in Pittsburgh. And then a couple days ago, there was that shooting down in Thousand Oaks. So many people killed, and here I am, set to preach about the first murder in recorded human history. This is the first event recorded in the Bible after Adam and Eve were sent out from the garden of Eden. Have you ever thought about that? We have this quick overview of creation and the fall, and then we leave the garden, and this is the first thing we're told about. We don't start off with "And then Adam and Eve went and built a house" or how they started farming. No mythological story about how humans tricked God and stole fire, or how the spider got its web, or some silly thing like that. No, the story of humankind starts off with one brother getting jealous of the other and murdering him.

You sit there, and you read this story, and you think to yourself, "Why God? Why is that the first story you want to tell us?" I think there's a reason for this. It's interesting that for all the talk about Genesis being interpreted as literal or figurative, all the talk of evolution verses creation and all the debating, there are actually very few details in the early chapters of Genesis. We have no idea how long Adam and Eve were in the garden before they sinned. We have no idea what food Cain was growing. We have no idea where Abel got the flocks he was taking care of, or even what animals they were. We know that Cain was born first, then Abel, and then later Seth, but we have no idea where their wives came from. Did they marry sisters? We know they had other brothers and sisters, but none of them are ever named. Did God create other people than just Adam and Eve to start with?

We don't get any of those details. It's almost like God doesn't care about any of that. The goal of the Bible isn't to give us a detailed description of how the earth came into being. The first real details we get are from this story here. On that note, the fact that Cain killing his younger brother is the first event really described in the Bible is a very meaningful message. God is giving us a warning; now that Adam and Eve had left the garden, this was going to be the norm. Anger and violence, even among close brothers. This is what the fallen world would be like. This would now be the world we lived in. A world with murder. A world with war. A world with genocide and tragedy. This is a world at war with God.

And in the midst of this, it almost feels like God failed. I mean look at it, honestly. Abel was the righteous one. Did you see that? The first story after Eden we get is not one with a moral of "Do the right thing and good things will happen to you, do the wrong thing and you get punished." Adam and Eve were told if they ate that fruit of the knowledge of good and evil they would die, yet here we are, the very first person in the recorded history of the Bible to die, was the guy God liked. The first person to die was the one God looked at and said "You see that right there? That's what we need more of, we need more guys like Abel." In our distress, we look at that and say "God, what were you doing?" "God, you tell us you'll be our shield and defender, an ever present help in time of need. Why weren't you shielding Abel? Why weren't you defending him? Where were you in his time of need?" Maybe we ask that for ourselves; God, where were you in my time of need? Where were you in...their time of need?

(Slide Change) That feeling, like God stood by, and did nothing. It makes me think of the story of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Jesus gets to town a few days after Lazarus has died, Martha and Mary come up to him, crying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. Jesus, we know you can do anything, but man, if only you had been here. If you had been there, my situation would have turned out differently. If only you had been there. Jesus, why weren’t you there?”

In those darkest moments, it may feel like God has forgotten us and left us. I think a lot of you know some of my history, having cancer when I was 15, 20 years ago, can you believe it. I was diagnosed exactly 20 years ago on Thanksgiving day, no less. I remember nights of just unbearable pain, days where it was too much to even get out of bed, and in those moments, in those moments of pain and loss, it’s easy to feel like God has left us. But even as we come to Jesus in despair, with our broken prayers almost accusing him of abandoning us, he walks with us and asks “where have you laid him?” Take me to the spot where you abandoned your hope. And he walks there with us, weeping. The shortest verse in the whole Bible, John 11:35. “Jesus wept” But even as Mary and Martha come to Jesus in tears, Jesus tells them “Your brother will rise again.”

And we say, of course we know that. Martha says “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” I know my theology, you don’t need to remind me. We die, we go to heaven, it’s... (Slide Change) Jesus says no, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.” Jesus is telling Martha that she doesn’t have to wait until that final day, she has the source of life right in front of her, in this moment, in her presence. Some of you, listen to me, it may feel overwhelming as we’re going through the hardest moments, when Abel’s body is still warm on the ground, and when Lazarus is lying cold in the tomb, but this message that Jesus speaks to Martha is also for us.

(Slide Change) We put our trust in this resurrection and life. And sure enough, Jesus brings Mary and Martha to the tomb, and brings Lazarus back to life.

We may not always get the miracle we want, but we have an eternal hope that’s secure. God is starting off his narrative of human existence on this earth by being completely honest with us and saying, “Yes, this is going to be bad. (Slide Change) This not going to be the paradise that Eden was.” And as Christians, as we work to advance the kingdom, to bring more people into a saving knowledge of God, into the right relationship with God, into that eternal hope, Jesus warns us, “You’re going to be like sheep among wolves.” You’re going to be Abel, but there are going to be Cains.

Before I talk too much about us, though, and the hope and the restoration, I want to talk about these two brothers, and what we can learn about the heart of God here. (Slide Change) Because part of us feels like God should have done, something to warn Abel, right? God is aware of the situation, how hard would it have been for a little, “Hey, watch out Abel, your brother is going a little off today, probably want to stay in the house today.” But look, God doesn’t warn Abel, he warns Cain. He sees Cain getting ready to go down the wrong path and calls out to him. And really, we don’t know what this looked like. I know, it’s a little hard for us to wrap our heads around a scene where God seems so much closer, so much more personal that it feels now. Like God is almost talking to people face to face like we would.

We don’t know what drove Cain to want to offer some of his crops to God, or why Abel thought he should bring the best of the firstborn of his flock. We don’t know how God communicated his approval of these offerings either, or what worship looked like back then. But whatever the reason, Cain brought

some of his crops, and Abel brought the best that he had to offer. Abel came with his whole heart, giving God the best he had before anything else. We don't really know what Cain brought, but it seems to be an offering of convenience, rather than sacrifice. So Cain missed out on some of the favor Abel received.

Note God's response to Cain's anger. Cain is upset, but God really isn't. God's message to Cain is one of reassurance more than anything else. Perhaps a bit of a warning as well. There's no reason to be upset or angry. There would be more chances to do what is right. This isn't the end of the world. In the future, just focus on doing what is right, and be very careful that you aren't captured by sin.

This reassurance does nothing for Cain, however. Cain is jealous. He wanted what Abel had, but apparently wasn't willing to do the work for it. Well, if I can't have God's favor, then no one can! And just like that, in a single moment, in a moment of emotion, one wrong decision cost Cain everything and left Adam and Eve without a child. For the first time, we see what a powerful emotion anger is, able to break even the most intimate of family bonds.

Cain, of course, is cursed by God. He would have to leave the area; crops would no longer grow for him there. From now on, he would be a restless wanderer. Cain complains, of course, that his punishment was too harsh. If he left, then he himself might be killed by anyone he ran into (implying that there are other humans in the world by this point besides just Adam and Eve's family). Interestingly, God grants Cain some protection so that he won't be killed. With that, Cain "went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden."

All we know after that is that Cain had a kid and built some kind of settlement or city. We don't know if he felt remorse, we don't know if he ever sought God after that. Honestly, it doesn't really matter. The point of the story is clear, if not a little Star Wars themed: jealousy leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to...the dark side. All for nothing. There was nothing to be gained, and everything to be lost. Yet that same foolish hatred lives on today, and continues to drive people to destroy the lives of others, as well as their own.

I think there's a reason God leaves Cain's story unfinished in the Bible. Because at some point in our life, we're going to relate to Cain. Because in this fallen and broken world, we are also fallen and broken people, even when we're putting on a good show, even when it looks like we're holding it all together. God's warning Cain, and He's warning us, not out of anger or hatred, but out of love. Watch out, sin is crouching at the door, it's coming for you. We're introduced to this idea, right in the beginning of the Bible, that there's this force, there's something, that's going to try to take us off the right path, going to try to separate us from God. And then later, over the course of the Bible, we're introduced more to this idea, that there's an accuser (Satan, right, that's what the word means, accuser) someone who's going after us, trying to show that we're not worthy, that we're not deserving of God's love. Trying to deceive us. Even later in the Bible, we learn that the serpent in the garden of Eden wasn't just a snake that was slithering around, it was actually Satan, the devil, working from the very beginning against us, angry because of his own mistakes.

God wants to warn us, right off the bat, first story in the Bible, that this deceiver, this sin, is trying to control us. And if it can't control us, it'll try to just take us out of the picture. And also, listen to me on this one, I know some people aren't going to like to hear it but I need to say it anyway, there are times the devil is going to succeed. He will deceive us, he will misdirect us, and we're going to mess up.



Maybe we won't mess up to the point of murdering our own family, hopefully we won't, but Jesus warns us "Hey, if you're angry? You've heard it said, anyone who murders will be subject to judgement, but I tell you, anyone who's angry, who slips into that jealous Cain mindset, watch out, because you're in danger now."

And then maybe we respond, God, how can I do anything then? If I'm going to mess up, I can't even go outside, sin is literally waiting at the door for me. What am I supposed to do?

**(Slide Change)** The apostle Paul, in Romans 7 writes "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

**(Slide Change)** He then gives us one answer: Jesus.

**(Slide Change)** Romans 8:1-2 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."

Listen to me on this one, and maybe some people will disagree with me on this, that's ok, but I think the reason God leaves Cain's story unfinished is he wants us to know that our story is unfinished. Your future isn't defined by the mistakes of your past, God is calling out to each and every one of us saying "Yes, I see it all, and I'm still sending my Son to die for you so you can be with me." God's goal isn't to make us prosper here on earth, **(Slide Change)** God wants to fix that thing that broke in the garden of Eden. He leaves Cain on earth, He takes Abel home. God's looking at us, and He's not saying, man, how can I get Matt a bigger house? How can I get Aren a nicer car? He's looking at you saying, "I'm bringing my child home where she belongs. I'm bringing my children back to the garden, where they were meant to be." We may be a little distressed, because it seems like God sometimes leaves evil unpunished at first. That God is slow in bringing justice. But he isn't **(Slide Change)**

Look, I know some people think that the Bible is like some big rule book, of all the things you're supposed to do in life to be a good person. And sure, there are some rules there, but that's not the point. The Bible first shows us that the world is broken, it's at war with God, and every war, every act of hatred, every moment of selfishness, every moment we feel desperate and abandoned...but we aren't abandoned. God had a plan from the beginning, a plan to restore us back to that right relationship. We may feel distant from God, maybe for different reasons. Sometimes we're the ones hiding in shame, maybe other times God is letting us face the consequences of our mistakes and our rejection of Him, but God's never as distant as we think. He was there walking in the garden with Adam and Eve, and He wants to be walking with you too.

And now what does that look like. How do we continue to hope in the power of God in a world where Cain kills Abel? First, we remember the story of Lazarus. **(Slide Change)** Jesus waited 4 days to get there to bring Lazarus back to life. Back then, they didn't believe you could bring someone back to life if it had been more than three days. They said after 3 days, the soul is gone. Jesus was already doing a miracle, but he was doing one that miraculous even for a miracle. This is the power of God, to raise the dead. And if you've trusted in Him, that same power is in you.

(Slide Change) It's a power to defeat armies. There's a scene in the Old Testament when a whole army goes after one prophet, Elisha. You guys might remember, I preached about that guy the last two times I preached, so I think we have to keep the Elisha streak going. Whole army surrounds his position, Elisha's guy is scared saying, what are we going to do? We're in trouble. Elisha just says, God, show this guy what's really going on. (Slide Change) And boom, the guy sees that the enemy army is actually the one surrounded by God's army. Some of you, listen, maybe your prayer shouldn't be "God, get me out of this situation." Maybe try praying, God show me the army. Elisha goes and captures the entire enemy army, and marches them straight to the King of Israel, says, hey, these guys came to kill me, so I captured them and brought them here. We don't need to kill them, just give them something to eat and let them go home. Literally, this army comes to kill him, he catches them, and lets them go, and they decided not to try that again. See, people can learn.

(Slide Change) Ok, I have a cool one for you. Any of you guys know this guy? They called him Leo the great, and for a lot of scholars, he's the first person they really identify as having the title of Pope. Major bishop in Rome, during the time when the Roman empire is just falling apart. Attila the Hun moves in, he's conquering land, and he's ready to go after the city of Rome. Roman government has nothing, they're running away, there are no defenses, it looks like a lot of people are going to die. Leo goes out there, one man verses an army, right? He was the only one left in the city with the kind of authority to do something about this situation, to stop the city from being destroyed, so he stepped up. Historians, they're not entirely sure what happened, don't know who said what, how anything was done, all we know is one thing, Attila and his army left. They left. Didn't attack the city, didn't steal anything, just one man of God verses an army, and the army leaves. If that's not enough, literally three years later almost the same thing happens, different guy comes in with a different army, Leo goes out...and that's that. Army goes away, Leo wins. Because it's not one man verses an army, it's God verse an army. And fun fact, you know yesterday we were doing the food festival, apparently November 10<sup>th</sup> is like Pope Leo day in the Catholic church. It was funny, I was thinking about how to include stories of guys taking down armies in the sermon for this week, I thought of Leo and wanted to include his story, and as I was reviewing the history I found out this was Leo day.

Anyway, to wrap this all up, yeah, I know things look bad now. It's easy to feel...just...lost, when we hear about murders, about wars, fires all around the state, they just had that shooting in Thousand Oaks and now they're having to evacuate because of the fires, we have fires up here, people were walking around with masks this week at SF State, we see tragedy around the world, a whole caravan of people, thousands of people, currently traveling from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, fleeing from violence and gangs and just dangerous situations. I think of the crisis in Yemen right now, parts of Africa that are still in danger of Boko Haram going around kidnapping and killing people, kids, selling girls into slavery and laughing about it.

And we could keep going, the same things have been happening all throughout history, ever since Cain and Abel. And yeah, we won't change it. It's a broken world and we can't fix it. So, what do we do? We advance. We conquer armies. Not by our power, but by God's power. And it's not people we're fighting, rather it's people we're saving.

Ephesians 6:12 Paul writes "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Even this week, as I was reading about the shootings in the last few weeks, looking at the stories of the victims, reading the stories of the people fleeing the violence in Central America, hoping somewhere on this planet where they can find peace and safety, I ask myself, am I advancing the kingdom of God here on earth? Am I sharing the hope of salvation and eternal life with people? I'm I fixing my eyes on heavenly things? Because it starts with us first. Don't worry about changing the world first. First we align our hearts to God, we seek his spirit, walk in step with him. And then ask God to send you. The harvest is plentiful, you have no idea. There are people out there desperate for the hope Jesus gives, are you going to be the one to bring that message?

This week, I want to share a few thoughts to follow up Sunday's sermon; this time looking at King David. King David is one of the most well-known people in the Bible. A huge section of the Bible is devoted to events that occurred during his reign, and one of the most interesting ones is actually a disease outbreak that hits during his later years as king. David had a brief period of disobedience to God, and God responds by sending a plague over the land after giving David a few options to choose from. Over the course of just a few days, 70 thousand people died from this disease, and as the angel bringing this disease approaches Jerusalem, he stops by a farm. David sees this, somehow, and asks God to relent and instead direct his anger to David alone, rather than the people of Israel, since David had been the one to commit the wrong. God then sends the prophet Gad to David with some instructions for how to proceed, and a very interesting scene plays out.

2 Samuel 24:18-25

And Gad came that day to David and said to him, "Go up, raise an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." <sup>19</sup> So David went up at Gad's word, as the LORD commanded. <sup>20</sup> And when Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Araunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground. <sup>21</sup> And Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be averted from the people." <sup>22</sup> Then Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood." <sup>23</sup> All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king." And Araunah said to the king, "May the LORD your God accept you." <sup>24</sup> But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels<sup>g</sup> of silver. <sup>25</sup> And David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.

David is instructed to build an altar at this site, and the owner of the land is more than happy to give his king everything needed, both the land and the animals for the sacrifice, but David says no. I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing. It's such a powerful line, because David knows something very important. Offerings we give to God have meaning because they are something that have value to us. Some leftover scraps that we don't really want; some unwanted gift we received that we're looking to pawn off, something we stole or cheated to acquire; these are offerings that don't actually cost us anything. They're not coming from the heart, we're just giving it to God so we can get it out of our way, or even worse, maybe just to put on a show of being generous so other people will applaud us.

But David knows the most important thing isn't the value of the offering, but rather the heart behind it. We see this mindset reflected in one of the lines he wrote in

Psalms 51:16-17

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

<sup>17</sup>The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

It's not about the monetary value of the sacrifice, but rather the heart behind it. Too often, the offerings people bring to church are just their unwanted leftovers. Church closets are filled with various items "donated" by people just looking for a place to dump their unwanted junk. You'll also run into people who only give donations when they can get some kind of a public recognition for it; get their names on the sides of buildings or get some other special accolade. These offerings aren't coming from a love of God as much as they're coming from a love of self.

So what makes a good offering? A good offering is first of all willingly given, as well as cheerfully given. It's something you feel will have value to God because it has value to you; maybe it's money, but maybe also it's time, or useful items such as food for the hungry or clothes for the poor. It's also important that the offering not be done for attention or recognition or with the goal of getting something in return, and if you feel that's a temptation of yours it might help to give your offering anonymously, so only God knows about it.

Lastly, remember that we're not giving to God because we want him to give us something; we're giving back because we've already received. We're acknowledging that God is the source of everything we have, and by giving to God out of our blessings we're giving him honor and glory. We're declaring to all the people around us that God is the one sustaining and providing for us, both during the good times and the hard times. And David's offering here had a major impact, not just for the plague but also for the future of God's people, because that farm David bought was eventually the site that was used to build the temple of Jerusalem, which was the center of worship all the way up to the time of Jesus. So let's not bring meaningless offerings; we'll give the best we have to God, and watch as he makes something even better out of it.

Lara

Matthew 18, verses 6 and 7

“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. <sup>7</sup>Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!

Matt

The classic story of Oliver Twist follows the journey of a young orphan, Oliver, set during the mid-1800's in England. We follow Oliver as he is mistreated and manipulated by various influences encounters, from the abusive workhouse run by cruel and selfish managers

Insert Please Sir, can I have some more clip

to the deceitful Fagin who recruits young children to commit crimes, telling them they need to steal from others in order to get ahead in life.

Lara

Yes, the important life lesson:

In this life, one thing counts

In the bank, large amounts

Matt and Lara

I'm afraid these don't grow on trees,

You've got to pick-a-pocket or two

You've got to pick-a-pocket or two, boys, (Matt looks aside while Lara steals a dollar)

You've got to pick-a-pocket or two.

Lara

But in the end of the story, everyone reaps the rewards of the life they lived. The manipulative Fagin ends up losing all the stolen goods he's accumulated over his lifetime, the violent Bill Sikes is shot as he attempts to escape while kidnapping Oliver, and Oliver is eventually connected to some upper class family members and adopted by the kind Mr. Brownlow. Built into this story is a warning; the wicked who mistreat the helpless and the orphan will face the consequences of their sin, because God cares for the weak and humble.

Matt

We see this lesson emphasized heavily in Matthew 18. Jesus warns his disciples not to chase after status and prestige, but rather to care for those who are most in need. Matthew 18:10

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.” We need to take this challenge seriously, because it applies just as much to us as the apostles. There’s also a warning in this passage to those who would mislead and corrupt young children; as Jesus says it would be better for them to drown in the sea than to be found guilty before God of leading His little ones astray.

Lara

So what does it look like to care for children the way Jesus commands? First, we’re committed to raising children in the truth. We want to share wisdom, so children can navigate the various deceptions the world throws at them. Whether it’s people like Fagin, who try to lead children down the path of selfish immorality, or people like Bill Sikes who live a life filled with violence, we want to equip the next generation to be on guard against false teachings and ideologies. Galatians 6, verses 7 and 8 warns:

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. <sup>8</sup>For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

Matt

And beyond just teaching and equipping, we also want to imitate the attitudes of people like Mr. Brownlow, who takes Oliver in and cares for him, even after Oliver tried to steal from him with some of the other boys from Fagin’s gang. Our lives should be defined by that kind of compassion and grace, being willing to sacrifice for those in need. Jesus wants us to shine as lights in a dark world, being role models for the next generation. The world is filled with people like Oliver, being pushed here and there by every wave life throws at them, but we know the way to anchor ourselves is by being rooted in the words of Christ. Living our lives as role models for others allows us to demonstrate the power of that anchor. And we’ll also find true joy and fulfillment as we’re living life that way, because that’s what God created us for.

Lara

I can personally share that Christian mentors have had a huge impact on my spiritual growth. At different phases of my Christian walk, different Christian influences encouraged me to stay the course, trust the Lord’s ways and timing, and keep my focus on Christ. We just had the memorial service for Arpi Haleblan last weekend, and she was the Sunday school teacher who encouraged me to accept Christ when I was in elementary school. She even accompanied me playing piano as I sang for various church events, and helped me feel like CACC was my home. Years later during my illness, she literally sent me a card every 60 days to keep my faith strong amidst my pain. She was literally the body of Christ to me during this time.

Matt

And that's what God calls us to. God puts people in our lives to serve and encourage, so let's take that responsibility seriously. Pray for the opportunities, and be ready. Go out each day with your mission in mind. And we'll see you all next time.



Only death awaits

Luke 22:41-44 – He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

It was the end of a long journey. A journey full of laughter, sorrow, frustration, joy, hope, disappointment, and a lot of sermons and parables. The end, but also the beginning of something new. We have a tendency of seeing death as the end. It's only natural, of course. After someone is dead, they typically stop talking us, or spending time with us. In their absence, it feels like we'll never see them again. Then there's the fear. What happens when we die? What lies on the other side? Do I simply...cease to be...? Will I know I'm dead?

I'm sure Jesus didn't have a lot of those fears or questions; he seemed to have a pretty good handle on what was going to happen next. He explained quite clearly to his disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them where he was going. He was returning to the Father; there was no question about that. But even knowing the outcome, his final destination if you will, he wasn't looking forward to the journey. The pain of watching your closest friends desert you. The pain of whips and thorns and nails, insults and jeers...seeing your own children, really, the people you created with love, laughing at you as the life slowly drains from your body over the course of several hours.

We will all face death, at some point. Probably not one as gruesome as Jesus' death, but regardless it's a moment most people aren't looking forward to. It's quite ironic really, when you think about it, that the one thing most certain in our lives is the thing we usually least like dwelling on. We immerse ourselves in pleasures and entertainment and work and anything else we can find to take our minds off of it. There's actually an interesting little line about that in Ecclesiastes 7:2 – "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart."

Death is the destiny...but not the end. Sometimes I have fun conversations with people about how we can know what happens after we die. Of course, the afterlife isn't something we can observe ourselves. We can't measure it, peak into it, nor study it in any way. What do we need? Really we need someone who's been there. Someone who has been dead, and comes back to tell us what it's like.

Ah, but can you really trust those stories from people who say they were in heaven for 20 or 30 minutes or something like that? Maybe they were just hallucinating, or dreaming. No...we need someone who was definitely dead. Dead for a few days. Stabbed through the heart, bled out, cold, stiff, wrapped up and buried...that kind of dead. Right? Preferably someone who seemed reliable while he was alive; someone who demonstrated true power and knowledge. Someone you knew was always going to speak the truth, even if it ticked everybody off. If someone like that came back to life; walking around and talking with people, telling people what was going to happen to us after we die...that would be the person worth listening to. Especially if, after he came back to life, none of his followers were afraid of death anymore. Almost as if everyone who knew this guy suddenly lost all fear of what awaited them on the other side of this life after he comes back to life and tells them about it.

Today, we commemorate the death of the one person to ever walk the earth that could reliably fit that description. The one person who, knowing full well what was about to happen, told his followers ahead of time what to expect. Someone who didn't need to suffer for anything, but considered us each valuable enough to suffer for.

And Sunday, we will commemorate his resurrection.

Good Friday and Easter are times to ask yourself, "What do I really believe?" What are you investing your life in? In a few billion years, when the sun explodes and destroys the solar system, what will be left of everything you've done? Where will you be? Is there anything that can give you hope, looking at such a future? The future we know will be?

Romans 5:6-8 "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

There is only one hope Jesus had to offer. Not wealth and prosperity, fame and fortune. Certainly not health and long life. The one hope Jesus left us with was the hope that we would come back to life just like he did. Not because we were good and deserved it, but because he already paid the price for it. This week is a chance for each of us to ask ourselves if that is really what our hope is in, or if we instead look to the future in fear, thinking only death awaits...

## Origin of Hatred

I think it's very significant that the first detailed story of human interaction in the Bible is one of jealousy, anger, and murder. The book of Genesis starts off with a very brief overview of creation, a little "God said" here and some "God said" there, a very quick note about a piece of fruit and getting kicked out of Eden, but then the real story starts. Two brothers: Cain and Able.

### Genesis 4:2-9

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought the fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering He did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

It's interesting that for all the talk about Genesis being interpreted as literal or figurative, all the talk of evolution verses creation and all the debating, there are actually very few details in the early chapters of Genesis. We have no idea how long Adam and Eve were in the garden before they sinned. We have no idea what food Cain was growing. We have no idea where Abel got the flocks he was taking care of, or even what animals they were. We have no idea where Cain's wife came from. We know that Cain was born first, then Abel, and then later Seth, but we have no idea where their wives came from. Did they marry sisters? We know they had other brothers and sisters, but none of them are ever named. Did God create other people than just Adam and Eve to start with?

It's almost like God doesn't care about any of that. The goal of the Bible isn't to give us a detailed description of how the earth came into being. The first real details we get are from this story here. On that note, the fact that Cain killing his younger brother is the first event really described in the Bible is a very meaningful message. Now that Adam and Eve had left the garden, this was going to be the norm. Anger and violence, even among close brothers. This is what the fallen world would be like. This would now be the world we lived in. A world with murder. A world with war. A world with genocide and tragedy.

The motivation is also a fascinating aspect of this story. We don't actually see God mandate any kind of sacrifice or offering this early in the Bible. We don't know what drove Cain to want to offer some of his

crops to God, or why Abel thought he should bring the best of the firstborn of his flock. We don't know how God communicated his approval of these offerings either, or what worship looked like back then. But whatever the reason, Cain brought some of his crops, and Abel brought the best that he had to offer. Abel came with his whole heart, giving God the best he had before anything else. We don't really know what Cain brought, but it seems to be an offering of convenience, rather than sacrifice. So Cain missed out on some of the favor Abel received.

Note God's response to Cain's anger. Cain is upset, but God really isn't. God's message to Cain is one of reassurance more than anything else. Perhaps a bit of a warning as well. There's no reason to be upset or angry. There would be more chances to do what is right. This isn't the end of the world. In the future, just focus on doing what is right, and be very careful that you aren't captured by sin.

This reassurance does nothing for Cain, however. Cain is jealous. He wanted what Abel had, but apparently wasn't willing to do the work for it. Well, if I can't have God's favor, then no one can! And just like that, in a single moment, in a moment of emotion, one wrong decision cost Cain everything and left Adam and Eve without a child. For the first time, we see what a powerful emotion anger is, able to break even the most intimate of family bonds.

Cain, of course, is cursed by God. He would have to leave the area; crops would no longer grow for him there. From now on, he would be a restless wanderer. Cain complains, of course, that his punishment was too harsh. If he left, then he himself might be killed by anyone he ran into (implying that there are other humans in the world by this point besides just Adam and Eve's family). Interestingly, God grants Cain some protection so that he won't be killed. With that, Cain "went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden."

All we know after that is that Cain had a kid and built some kind of settlement or city. We don't know if he felt remorse, we don't know if he ever sought God after that. Honestly, it doesn't really matter. The point of the story is clear, if not a little Star Wars themed: jealousy leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to...the dark side. All for nothing. There was nothing to be gained, and everything to be lost. Yet that same foolish hatred lives on today, and continues to drive people to destroy the lives of others, as well as their own.

Jesus understood this point all too well. In his famous Sermon on the Mount, as he preaches through the Law of Moses and what the application looks like in our lives, he address the issue of murder in a very challenging way:

Matthew 5:21-22

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to

judgement. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca' (most likely an insult saying someone is "empty-headed") is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' (an insult indicating both a lack of morality as well as intelligence) will be in danger of the fire of hell."

The message in this is clear: from God's perspective, there is little difference between the act of murder and motivations that lead to it. Someone who lives a life guided by hatred has the heart of a murderer, and in one way or another that heart will be reflected in their life. We see that hatred at work in the world all around us every day.

## Parables of Minas and Talents

Hi everyone. I've enjoyed going through all these different parables with you during this series, and now we reach the end. We're going to wrap up by looking at two parables that will probably be familiar to you. The parable of the Minas, and the parable of the talents. As Jesus was getting closer to the end of his ministry and his crucifixion, he started telling his disciples more parables about what kind of lives we should live once he was gone. They had seen so much from him; so many miracles, so many sermons; what would life look like without him by their side?

The parable of the minas and the parable of the talents have very similar themes. In both cases a wealthy person or a ruler leave for a while, and the servants are left in charge of things. Each of the servants are given quite a bit of money and are told to put it to good use. Their command is simple; be productive.

In the parable of the minas, each servant is given the same amount, and in the parable of the talents, they are given different amounts; with more money given to the servants who had proven more reliable and capable in the past. In each parable, the servants go out and put the money to good use, and when their master returns they bring him the profit they made. Some doubled their money, some earn even more than that. However, in both versions of this parable, there is one servant who decides not to do anything with the money; he buries it in the ground to keep it safe, and then returns it to the master once the master is back. In both cases, the servant has the same excuse: I know you're a hard man, you take things that you didn't work for, I'm afraid of you, so I kept your money buried over there and here it is, I'm giving it back.

I think there's a reason Jesus gives two different versions of this parable. Each version tells us something different about how God blesses us in this life. In one, the master gives everyone the same amount; each servant gets one mina. This represents the fact that there are some things in life we all equally receive from God. We each get 24 hours in the day. We all have the same oxygen to breathe, and we all have a voice to share God's word with others in some way. But the other version of this parable shows us that God does give some of us more to use than others, and when much is given much is required. If God gives me more resources to work with; maybe more money or more wisdom, or more influence, I have an obligation to use that for God's kingdom, and not just myself.

Then there's this guy who just buries what was given to him in the ground. He doesn't use it for anything productive. This represents a person who goes through life focused just on their own wants and comfort. Today, it might be a person who uses all their intellect and skills to become wealthy, or powerful, meanwhile not caring about God or about others. The servant in this parable sees this time with the boss being away as a chance for an extended vacation, just to have fun and not care about anyone else. Having responsibilities just sounds boring, and definitely too much work. Just enjoy life, and get as much stuff for yourself as you can.

But in the end of these parables, we see that the one who was hurt most by this laziness, is actually the servant himself. Despite the accusation from the lazy servant that the master was just going to steal whatever he had worked for, all the other servants got to keep the results of their labor, whether they earned a little or earned a lot, and were even given more rewards and promotions on top of what they worked for. Jesus is showing us that a life focused on the eternal things really does have rewards that

far outweigh what we were initially given, both rewards here on earth as well as in heaven. The lazy servant, however, doesn't get to keep anything, even the thing he was originally given.

If he couldn't be trusted to wisely use a small amount, he's not going to be given any more. He missed out on the opportunity. Jesus concludes the parable by saying that whoever has, will be given more and he will have an abundance. But whoever doesn't have, even what they have will be taken away from them. For those who spend their whole lives trying to gain temporary, material things, they'll have nothing waiting for them in heaven when they die. The little they did have will be left behind.

As Jesus is preparing to be crucified, he wants to make sure his followers know that there will be opportunities to continue the work after he is gone. They've been following Jesus for years, learning from him. What are they going to do with the lessons they've learned, and the miracles they've seen? Are they going to go back to their ordinary lives as fisherman or farmers, or are they going to invest their lives in something greater; something with eternal significance? Jesus doesn't expect all of us to be the Apostle Paul, or the Apostle Peter, but he wants all of us to do something with the lives we're given. Maybe it's healing the sick or the hurting, maybe it's taking care of the poor and the needy. Maybe it's going to a place you've never been to and telling people about Jesus. Maybe it's making a little YouTube video on something Jesus taught, so other people can learn. Or maybe for some of you now it's just studying hard and learning, growing in knowledge and wisdom and compassion. Whatever it is, do it with the mindset that God is watching, that God is providing us with the things we need to do the work he wants us to. God is eager to reward us as we use his gifts wisely. So let's not be lazy, and bury our talents in the ground to be wasted. Instead, live every day knowing that Jesus will one day bring us to heaven with him, and that the difficulties and struggles we go through now won't be for nothing.

And that's it for our series on the parable of Jesus. We're taking a break this Sunday, and instead we'll get together for a fun little activity after church, so let me know if you can make it. Hopefully see everyone soon, and as always if you ever need anything, I'm just one phone call away.

I think the guy who buries the money in the ground missed out on a huge opportunity. If you're going to bury something, you at least need to make a treasure map and have a treasure hunt. Right? The boss comes back, the servant says, hey, you've been working too hard, I made this fun treasure hunt for you to have a relaxing day with the kids. Or maybe have a big contest, where everyone has to buy a ticket for a chance to find the treasure, and make a little money selling tickets. I bet if he did that, he probably wouldn't have gotten in as much trouble.





Luke 16:1-15

Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. <sup>2</sup> So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— <sup>4</sup> I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'" So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' "Nine hundred gallons<sup>u</sup> of olive oil,' he replied.

"The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.'

<sup>7</sup> "Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?'

"A thousand bushels<sup>u</sup> of wheat,' he replied.

"He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'

<sup>8</sup> "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. <sup>9</sup> I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

<sup>10</sup> "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. <sup>11</sup> So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? <sup>12</sup> And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

<sup>13</sup> "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

<sup>14</sup> The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.

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This is probably the most controversial parable Jesus tells. On the surface, it seems like Jesus is telling us to be dishonest, maybe even steal. But that's not the point Jesus is trying to make.

In this parable, we have a dishonest manager, and his boss has finally had enough of him and tells him he's fired. Clean out your office, organize all the paperwork, and get out of here. The manager realizes he's in trouble. He doesn't have enough money to last very long, and no one will hire him now that he has this reputation of being dishonest. Of course he could always try to steal money from his boss as he leaves, but chances are he wouldn't be able to steal enough money to last very long without getting caught.

So he has an idea; what if instead of stealing a lot of money for himself and risk getting caught, he steals just a little bit for a lot of different people, in a way that would be hard to spot. So he brings in people who owe his boss money, and one by one he changes the records for how much they owe. In this way, he hopes to get everyone else to like him, so that later when he doesn't have any money or place to live he can have friends who will support him.

Now don't misunderstand this story; Jesus is not saying it's good to steal or to be dishonest or to try to bribe people to be your friends. That's not why this guy was smart. He's smart because he recognized that a crisis was coming, and in order to survive it was more important to have allies than to have wealth. He was better off stealing for other people than just stealing for himself.

Why does Jesus choose a dishonest man to be the main character in this parable. Because Jesus wants to make it clear to everyone; even the most selfish, dishonest person can recognize that it can be more useful to have people you can depend on in a crisis than to just have a lot of money. How much more should we, as honest people who want to do what's right, recognize that it's better to be generous than to be greedy. How much more should we recognize that what we need more than money, is an ally who can save us when the crisis comes.

The religious leaders laugh at Jesus, of course. For them, wealth was power, it was proof that God was blessing them, and it seemed silly to them to value people over money. But Jesus is saying we're not the owners of the wealth we have; we're the managers of it. God has entrusted us with various gifts in this life, and it's up to us to use them responsibly. One day we will each face a crisis, and that crisis is death. When that happens, our money and possessions won't help us; all that matters is if we have an ally who will save us.

There is a famous missionary, Jim Elliot who was killed by a tribe in Ecuador he went to share the gospel with. He knew going there that there was a good chance they would kill him, but he also knew that without him they would probably never hear the gospel. When asked why he was willing to risk his life, he had a very famous response: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Even though he was killed, his wife Elisabeth continued to reach out to this tribe, and as a result they were able to hear the gospel.

There are temporary things in life, and there are eternal things. Like we mentioned on Sunday, when we looked at 1 Corinthians 13, at the end of everything, when everything else is gone, we have three things left: faith, hope, and love. Let's invest our lives to build those things.

Hope you have a great week, praying for all of you. As always, if you need anything, I'm one phone call away.

Luke 7 – 36-50

<sup>36</sup> When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. <sup>38</sup> As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

<sup>39</sup> When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

<sup>40</sup> Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said.

<sup>41</sup> "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

<sup>43</sup> Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

<sup>44</sup> Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

<sup>48</sup> Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

<sup>49</sup> The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

<sup>50</sup> Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This is a very famous scene in the life of Jesus; Jesus anointed by a sinful woman. What's interesting about this scene is we don't know any of the backstory behind either this Pharisee named Simon nor this woman who comes. They're never mentioned before this point and they never come up again. But something happened to this woman that radically changed her life. It wasn't unusual for people to try to get close to Jesus in order to get something from him, be healed, or see a miracle, but what's interesting here is this woman isn't coming to get something from Jesus, she's coming to give. Whatever Jesus did for her, it was so radically transformative that she's willing to interrupt a very important dinner, even embarrass herself, in order to give something back.

Simon, meanwhile, doesn't understand what's happening. He knows something about this woman's history that we don't, she apparently had a reputation for being sinful, but we have no idea why. And I think there's a reason why the Bible leaves her past out for us. God is showing us in this story that when we're forgiven by Jesus, our past is left behind us. God forgets about it. As far as the east is from the west, as the line in the psalm goes, and now we're a new person. And that new life, that transformation, changes us.

Jesus uses this moment to teach Simon a lesson about love and forgiveness. In this parable, two people have their debts erased, one that owes maybe ten thousand dollars and the other that probably owes closer to one hundred thousand dollars. Jesus is helping us understand that when we're forgiven, when our debts are paid for us, there is a natural love we have for that person who saved us. The more spectacular the salvation, the greater the love we have for the savior. The love this woman has for Jesus is proof that he saved her from her sins. But there's a warning for Simon in this story; his lack of love is also proof of something, isn't it?

For most Pharisees during the time of Jesus, their pride got in the way of the messages Jesus was sharing. They didn't want to admit there was anything wrong with them; they were convinced they were going to earn God's favor by living very religious lives. When Jesus started talking about forgiving sins, they were offended. This is something we need to look out for in our own lives. It can be very easy to get so caught up in religious practices, things like going to church, having ceremonies, going through rituals, that we forget about the forgiveness we all need. When that happens, we might start to get resentful when we see someone else receive forgiveness and have their life changed. We start looking down on other people, counting their sins while ignoring our own. We become self righteous, and think we're better than other people.

Now the truth is, you don't have to be religious to become self righteous. You will run into all kinds of people in life who are self righteous, both people who believe in God and people who don't. Very often they'll pick one action or attitude that they'll claim is worse than anything else you could do, and use that as an excuse to pretend they're better. But here's the trick, the more we realize how much we've been forgiven by God, the less concerned we'll be with trying to be better than other people. Because the more we understand God's love, the more we're changed.

That's our parable for the day, we're almost done with the series, just one week to go, so looking forward to seeing everyone on Sunday. As always, if you ever need anything, I'm just one phone call away.

Another interesting fact here; this perfume on the feet thing doesn't just happen once to Jesus, but twice. This was the first time, the second time was right before Jesus was crucified, during a dinner that was honoring him for raising someone from the dead.



## Parable of Talents

If you're going to bury money, you at least need to have a treasure hunt.

During a particularly dangerous time of imprisonment for the Apostle Paul, when it looked like his life could be over very soon, he wrote a fascinating letter to the church in Philippi. Early in the letter, he contemplates the possibilities of surviving or dying in this situation:

“Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.”

I think it’s an important passage for us to reflect on whenever we face deadly situations. It’s a passage that has come up in many conversations I’ve had over the past 10 months since I first got this cancer diagnosis. Paul highlights a crucial dynamic for the Christian. On one hand, there’s a part of us eagerly looking forward to our reward in Heaven, finally united with the One who loved us enough to die for us. On the other hand, we each have our important work here on earth to finish, and we don’t give up on it just because we hit a stretch of rocky road. No matter how deadly or impossible the peril, we remain until the work we were created to do is completed. Despite the hopelessness of his situation, Paul knew that he still had work to do on this earth, so it wasn’t his time to go quite yet.

Going into surgery this week, I think it’s a good time to look back on this last year, and share some of the thoughts I’ve had throughout it. Most of you know this is actually my second time dealing with a stage 4 cancer; the first time was when I was just 15 with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Treatment for that was a full year of chemotherapy, and after that the cancer was completely gone. Doctors gave me a 75% chance of survival with my initial diagnosis back then; slightly better odds than we normally think of when we think of cancer.

So, on the one hand, a stage 4 cancer diagnosis doesn’t seem quite as impossible for me to beat having already gone through it once. However, this cancer is a little different. It’s a very rare form of small intestinal cancer, extremely aggressive and invasive. Generally it doesn’t respond to chemotherapy and people who are diagnosed with it in the condition I was back in June typically don’t survive for very long. For me, it had already spread to three different places in my intestines, to some lymph nodes, and several other spots around my abdomen, which was too much spread to try to address with surgery. In fact, my first instinct when I saw the histology report, before I even met with my oncologist, was that I should probably start figuring out how to say goodbye to people. I was actually thinking about putting together some kind of goodbye video and giving it to someone to hold on to just in case things went south really quickly.

Then after a few days of that mindset, something changed. I can’t really explain it, it wasn’t some new medical data I came across or new information or even meeting with my oncologist...I was just filled with a strong conviction that I wouldn’t need to be worrying about goodbyes any time soon. I knew how impossible the odds were of surviving this cancer (my PhD was in cancer diagnostics, after all). It just didn’t seem to matter anymore. It’s the Philippians 1 principle; it was necessary for me to remain, so



remain I shall. The more I found people praying for me all over the world, the stronger my conviction felt. Whatever happened, I wouldn't be needing that video.

And then I saw the hand of God working throughout treatment. Chemo treatment ended up being surprisingly easy, considering we were hitting me with the strongest regimen we could. Far from knocking me down for days after each treatment, I found myself largely unaffected by the typical chemotherapy side effects. For the most part I had my normal amount of energy, and really wasn't inhibited by nausea. The pain from the cancer seemed to subside fairly quickly as well, suggesting a good response, and other than one brief stretch in the hospital in August following some kind of stomach virus infection I didn't have any significant incidents throughout the course of treatment. After the first 4 treatments, we did a couple more scans to see how the cancer had responded, and surprisingly the response seemed pretty good; enough that my oncologist wanted to start touching base with a surgeon to shoot for some surgery after the treatment course was finished, with the goal of attempting to remove all the remaining cancer. I was pretty impressed with the development.

With the positive response to chemotherapy and the fact that my body wasn't really being significantly by treatment, we went ahead and pushed the 8 treatment cycles all the way up to 12, to see how much we could shrink the cancer ahead of surgery. And again, it really wasn't until the last treatment or two that I started to feel some of the side effects from the chemotherapy. Going into January, things were looking pretty good, with the goal of doing a scan after my last treatment and planning to schedule surgery sometime early February, to give my body a month to recover from chemotherapy.

Unfortunately, that's when things got a little disorganized. My last treatment was January 7<sup>th</sup>, but I wasn't able to get the scan in until the 25<sup>th</sup>. The scan results looked good according to my oncologist, showing the cancer had continued to respond, but then it was a week and a half until I heard from the surgeon. Because of some of the lymph nodes that were involved, she told me it wouldn't be possible to remove all the cancer, although she'd be willing to give surgery a shot anyway to see what could be possible, aiming for some time in February. After two weeks waiting to hear about confirming a surgery date, a friend found the number for the surgery scheduling office for me, so I called in to ask what was taking so long to schedule me in. It seems I had simply fallen through the cracks, and now the earliest surgery date available was March 8<sup>th</sup>, a full month after I was originally imagining us doing the surgery.

Already putting chemotherapy on hold for surgery for such an aggressive cancer was a gamble, and I knew it. I had been willing to take that gamble when I thought there was a possibility we could remove all the cancer, assuming we would schedule the surgery relatively quickly. Had I known that surgery wouldn't be scheduled for two months and even at its best the surgeon wasn't expecting to be able to remove everything, I probably wouldn't have taken that gamble, but either way this is the place God has brought us to now. No sense in second guessing decisions at this point.

We go into this surgery Tuesday with a lot of unknowns. Because this is an invasive cancer, it doesn't always show up well on scans, so we don't know if the recent scan results represent an accurate picture of what we'll find when we open me up. We know the worst spot is in one area of my small intestine; that's the part that brought me in to the hospital with an obstruction two weeks ago. Given how aggressive we know this cancer to be, the doctors took this obstruction as a sign that the cancer had just grown back too much in the short time I had been off chemo, and even though they were willing to keep the March 8<sup>th</sup> surgery date on the books, there didn't seem to be much confidence that surgery would help me at that point. Once these cancers get to the point of causing obstructions like this, there aren't

a lot of great options. You can't resume chemotherapy while you have an intestinal obstruction, and the more intensive the surgery ends up being the longer you need to wait to try to resume chemotherapy, which just gives the remaining cancer that much more opportunity to grow back.

Then another twist came when the obstruction seemed to at least partly resolved itself on its own after a week in the hospital...as if either the obstruction wasn't entirely caused by the cancer or that the cancer has somehow shrunk all on its own, adding to the questions this week. I'm still in some discomfort, but the fact that I don't seem to be as bad now as I was two weeks ago is very interesting. There were actually several points during the first week in the hospital where I thought things were too bad to recover from, but each time we got a big prayer group together in respond and the situation turned around the next day. It seems God wants to be teaching us something about prayer during this time.

This has been a difficult battle up until this point, but it's a battle worth fighting. Of course as Christians, our mindset in the battle of life and death is a little different. I see a lot of people fighting battles dominated by fear; it's a fear of death that motivates them. I remember reading about wealthy people spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to cryofreeze themselves in the hopes that they could be thawed out some time in the distant future after we've discovered a cure for death or something...or at least a cure for whatever terminal illness they possibly have. The reality that no matter what you do to try to delay it, we're all going to face death at some point in our lives. These bodies aren't immortal.

The Christian fights for life for a different reason. A common question to arise in light of Heaven is whether we even want to continue to be on this earth at all. If Heaven is so much better, why stick around after you find salvation? We look forward to the day when we will be free of death and disease and the curse of sin in this world. Yet we also know that life is a precious gift from God, and shouldn't be discarded carelessly. The people and relationships in our lives are also precious gifts from God...even the ones that are difficult to love. And precious things are worth fighting for.

As Paul fought to be reunited with those whose lives he had impacted, so he could continue to feed into them, we also fight to continue the work we've been tasked with. There's pain in the fight, but there's joy in the victories, and joy in knowing the work isn't in vain. So let's see what comes of the surgery this week, and see where God takes us next.

Background: Became Christian here at camp in Winter 2004, topic was also about prayer

Teach at SFSU, PhD in Chem E; passionate about youth ministries because facing death at young age; a lot of people prayed for me. Prayer doesn't just connect us to God, it connects us to each other

Ask me three questions

What have we been praying for in the Lord's prayer?

God be glorified/honored, Kingdom advance, God's will be done, provision for daily needs, forgiveness, protection

Solo time: Key things Paul is praying for

Thanks

Wisdom

Revelation

Know God better at a personal level

Eyes of our heart by opened so we have hope in eternal life and God's power

When he talks about power, he gives an example, what is it?

Raising Jesus from the dead.

Knowing this power: remember/appreciate

This power is for us, the same power that rose Jesus from the dead, but what does that mean for us? Does that mean we need to be raised from the dead too? Are we dead? We're not just talking about the resurrection in the future, we're talking about now?

Maybe we don't need to physically be brought back to life, but we do need spiritual life. Look at God's promises in Ezekiel

Ezekiel 11:19 – "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh."

Ezekiel 36:26 – "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

What's a heart of stone and what's a heart of flesh? A heart that can't feel God's love and goodness, we feel dead inside, we feel like there's no purpose in life. It seeks after the pleasures of this world, but is never satisfied. Turned into a heart that actively seeks after God? It's not just a change from "I don't believe in God, but now I do believe in God." It's a heart that goes from "I don't care at all about God" to "I want to be with God daily, I want my life to be guided by God's love and goodness." This is God's promise for each of us; not only does God have the power to raise Jesus from the dead, but He has the power to change our hearts.

I mentioned earlier that I became a Christian here at camp. That weekend, I realized that I was missing something crucial that I saw in others around me. They had faith. They had faith in God, that when they

prayed God would hear them, and I realized that faith was the missing component in my life. And I was sitting down that night, going back and forth through different passages in the Bible, and I see this idea in James 1:5-8

Ouch, forget asking for wisdom, what I really need is faith; I was like that double-minded guy. I didn't understand God's power. I didn't understand God's love. I didn't understand what Paul was praying about in Ephesians...What if...what if I asked for it? What if I prayed and asked for faith? Could God answer a prayer like that? I thought about what I had been learning over that past year going to church, I had seen the evidence for the resurrection, I had contemplated about the reasons I had to believe the gospels were true, and I realized the evidence was there. The most logical explanation was that God was real, and Jesus was exactly who the Bible claimed he was...so...what was holding me back? How many of you know we can have head knowledge of something without really putting our trust in it? I can be on the top floor of a burning building, knowing there's a net out there waiting to catch me when I jump, seeing all the other people that jumped before you did and were perfectly safe, but in that moment you freeze up in fear. Ok, yes, I'm an engineer, of course there's going to be math. Can't be helped. And that's what I felt in that moment; fear. If I pray this prayer, what's going to happen?

It was a simple prayer I prayed that night. 11 words. God, give me the faith to make a prayer of faith. That was it. And in that moment, alone on my bed in my cabin, it was like a wrecking ball crashing through a wall in my heart, and everything changed. I experienced that power, truly experienced it, for the first time.

Now, I'm not saying that every time we pray it's like this amazing, mindblowing experience, but I am saying that prayer changes us. It gives God an opportunity to work in our hearts. And we need to have a hunger for it.

I was in Vietnam a few months ago on a mission trip. Normally I go to Haiti with a Christian group from UCLA that I was involved with in college, but this year Haiti has been too dangerous. Rioting, and general instability. So instead we decided to go someplace safer; Vietnam, where Christians are actively arrested by the government and put in jail just for being Christian. Actually, it's much safer now, you can actually have a church without being arrested, as you aren't being disruptive, but most of the pastors I met there have spent at least some amount of time in prison for being Christian. Some weeks, some months, some even years. But what amazed me most about the churches there was their commitment to prayer. Christians would travel over an hour to join with other believers just for prayer. And I mean, just prayer. No program, no sermon, no Bible study, no youth group game, just get together for an hour or two or three and pray together.

These are people that understand what it means to be strengthened by God's power through prayer. You don't do something like that out of ritual or just because people expect you to; you do it because something is happening in your life as a result

Chapter 2: We're now citizen's in God's kingdom, and being built together to become a dwelling for God  
3:14-21

Paul is saying that now that we've trusted in God for our salvation, we're citizens in his kingdom. Now, because we're citizens in that kingdom, Paul is praying what? What is he asking for?

## Strength

### Power through the Spirit

Understanding God's love: more important than ever with everything telling us we aren't good enough. Schools and tests and universities telling us we aren't smart enough; social media telling us we aren't beautiful enough, action stars telling us we aren't strong enough, wealthy celebrities telling us we aren't rich enough...all of it weighing on our hearts telling us we aren't good enough, that we don't deserve love. And it breaks my heart to see how broken families are now. In the bay area, I hear stories about families where the parents spend so much time working, they never spend any time with their kids. It's all baby sitters and nannies. Kids are growing up without knowing the love of a parent.

Then there's the opposite extreme in the media. There's this message out there that you're perfect just the way you are, that there's nothing wrong with you, that you deserve whatever you want. The problem is that's a shallow message, and at some level we know it. Someone who doesn't know anything about us, not even our name, comes and says "You're so wonderful, you're great, you're more than enough" and deep inside we say "What, you don't know me at all. Where does that even come from?" Two extremes; the message that you aren't good enough to be loved, always tearing us down, and this shallow message of everything is great that has no power to lift us out of our brokenness.

But what's God's love? God's love sees us in our broken state, it sees us in our sinfulness, and says "I'm going to die for that person" What's Paul praying for here? He's praying that we would be filled with faith. That we'd be filled with God's love. This love that transforms us and lifts us up, if we can have any hope in this fallen world, we need to be filled with this power. It allows us to resist this call that says we're not good enough to love, and tells us that God values us so much that he's willing to die for us, and not just die, but suffer a death far worse than we could ever imagine. And in this world where even the love of our own families seems to be going cold, God gives us this verse in Isaiah 49:15

I don't know where you are in your walk with Christ today. Maybe some of you are feeling full of this faith and power, and maybe some of you just feel broken and empty. Maybe some are confused, and don't know where to put your trust. But if you want more of this power, more of this faith in your life, tonight's the night to ask for it. In your cabin times tonight, you're going to look at the story of a desperate father, who sees that his faith is lacking, and cries out for help. If that's your cry tonight, then during your cabin time pray for it. If you have questions about the gospel, about the evidence for Jesus and the resurrection, anything like that, we're around, you can always ask us all week. But you can have all the evidence in the world, and be standing at the edge of that burning roof, looking down at that net ready to save you, and still be too scared to move. We need God to give us faith. So before we dismiss for cabin time, I want to sing one last song.

## Praying for Unity

### 3 Questions

I mentioned yesterday that I usually go to Haiti once a year with a Christian college ministry called Chi Alpha. Here's a picture of one of our teams from a few years ago. When we go, we stay at an orphanage in a small village, kind of out in the middle of nowhere. You can see our team here, we have people from all over the world. Uwe there is from Germany. We have Elisha over there, from China. Winston there is our leader, and he's actually a refugee from Vietnam, from the Vietnam war. We have diverse skills too; when we go, I'm usually one of the main preachers, and I also tend to fix broken stuff. Bust out my engineering skills. Uwe is a PhD physics genius, he handles a lot of the financial stuff, and is actually pretty good and speaking the native Creole language. Elisha over there is our business specialist; she tends to focus on creating job opportunities for people who are unemployed, and manages our scholarships to help put kids through school. We have some that specialize in working with the kids there, some that specialize in helping families, and some that just do whatever is needed. But the most amazing thing about this team that I've found is the unity. The way we support each other, the way we encourage each other, it's probably the most effective, united team I've ever worked with my entire life. An incredibly diverse team, but one with amazing unity.

Now, I want to read a story here, something that happened maybe 17 years ago or something like that. You know this church? Supposedly it's built over the tomb Jesus was buried in. So, it's a really important place.

## The Opposite of Unity

Tradition claims that Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built over the cave in which Christ is said to have been buried. In July 2002 the church became the scene of ugly fighting between the monks who run it. The conflict began when a Coptic monk sitting on the rooftop decided to move his chair into the shade. This took him into the part of the rooftop courtyard looked after by the Ethiopian monks.

It turns out that the Ethiopian and Coptic monks have been arguing over the rooftop of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for centuries. In 1752 the Ottoman Sultan issued an edict declaring which parts of the Church belong to each of six Christian groups: the Latins, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Copts, and Ethiopians. Despite the edict conflict over the church remains.

The rooftop had been controlled by the Ethiopians, but they lost control to the Copts when hit by a disease epidemic in the 19th century. Then in 1970 the Ethiopians regained control when the Coptic monks were absent for a short period. They have been squatting there ever since, with at least one Ethiopian monk always remaining on the roof to assert their rights. In response a Coptic monk has been living on the roof also, to maintain the claim of the Copts.

And so we get to a Monday in July 2002, when the Coptic monk moves his chair into the shade. Harsh words led to pushes, then shoves, until an all out brawl is going, including

the throwing of chairs and iron bars. At the end of the fight 11 of the monks were injured, including one monk unconscious in hospital and another with a broken arm. How tragic that a church which serves as a memorial to Christ is the scene for such bitter conflict among his followers. This is a far cry from Christ's call to love one another, turn the other cheek, and his prayer that his followers might "be one".  
Source: story reported by Reuters, Monday July 29, 2002

And here, just few years later, again in 2008, this time between the Armenian and the Greek monks. Fighting over who gets to walk where.

What does the world think then they see that? Christians fighting each because someone moved his chair into the shade? Is that what all your Jesus can do? What a joke. We're supposed to believe you have the words of eternal life when you're fighting over who gets to walk in what room in a church?

During your solo time, what did you read? What was Jesus praying for? Who was he praying for?

When he's praying for everyone who will believe, he's praying for us. He's praying that we would be united, not just united with God but also with each other. How many of you have read the different gospel accounts of this last night of Jesus? What's happening in this scene? Right Jesus is about to be betrayed, and the next day he's going to be crucified. Each of the 4 gospels give us different details of this night; different perspectives. It's interesting that the other three gospels focus on Jesus' prayer in the garden; What does he pray there? If you're willing, let this cup be taken from me, but not my will but yours be done. John leaves that part out, and instead focuses on this prayer that happens before they get to the garden. This is the last major prayer of Jesus that John records.

Why do you think this prayer is so important to John? John's gospel was probably the last one written, and a lot has happened in the church since the earlier gospels were written. Probably a lot of the other apostles had already been killed, John might have been the last one left. The leadership of the church has changed, but so has the membership. A greater diversity of people was present in the church now, and John wants us to know something. As Jesus was preparing to walk into his darkest hour, he was praying for us; that we would be united.

And it's hard, why is it so hard to have unity in the church?

You know this guy in the tree? Who is he? Short little Zacchaeus, the tax collector. What did people think of him? They hated him. As a tax collector, he was always exploiting them. He was stealing from them. A lot of them were probably living in poverty, starving, because of how Zacchaeus was abusing the system to collect more from them than he was supposed to. How do they react when Jesus invites Zacchaeus down? Seriously Jesus, him? Do you have any idea what he's like? Do you have any idea what he's done to me? Imagine a church, and over here is Zacchaeus, and right next to him is a person he exploited, and they're trying to worship God together. Sure, after meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus promised to pay everyone back 4 times what he stole and give half of what he had to the poor, but that doesn't change the fact that people had been suffering for years because of what he did. And now Jesus, you expect me to have unity and fellowship with him? Jesus, are you crazy? Do you see what a ridiculous miracle Jesus is praying for here? He's praying for unity between Zacchaeus, who is now a believer, and this other believer that he had stolen from.

You guys know this scene? The first martyr? Stephen, one of the original deacons in the early church. In Acts chapter 7, the Jewish leadership, the Sanhedrin, decide they need to take this guy out, so they bring some false witnesses in to accuse him of stuff he didn't say or do. And they manage to get a crowd angry enough to stone him. Who's that over there guarding the cloaks? The apostle Paul, before he became an apostle. What was Paul doing before Jesus appeared to him? Getting Christians thrown into jail. In Paul's own words, he was a violent man and a murderer. When he says murderer, maybe he just means Stephen, but it's also possible other Christians died because of him that we don't know about. Imagine that. Paul, a guy responsible for the death of a fellow Christian, maybe your friend, maybe even your family, and now he says he's seen Jesus and wants to come to church. When God caused Paul to go blind, he also called a Christian named Ananias to go heal him. What does Ananias say? Jesus, are you crazy? Do you know what this guy has done? Do you see what a ridiculous miracle Jesus is praying for here? He's praying for unity between the Apostle Paul and the Christians he persecuted, persecuted even to death.

We don't talk about this very much, but you know the gospel is advancing in Turkey. It's still very dangerous to be a Christian in Turkey, but Turks are coming to know Jesus. Some time ago, there were Turkish pastors that came to Armenian pastors in our churches. They said something just doesn't feel right in their churches in Turkey, they felt they needed to do something to atone for the sins of their ancestors during the genocide. They felt they needed to confess their guilt, acknowledge the genocide to the descendants of the victims, and ask for forgiveness. Of course, they can't confess on the behalf of an entire nation, but they can come just as themselves. What do you say to that? How do you respond? Jesus is praying that we, as Christians, would have unity with other Christians, even if they're Turks. Jesus, are you crazy? Do you have any idea what they did to our ancestors? Do you see what a ridiculous miracle Jesus is praying for, as he's preparing to talk into his darkest night? Make no mistake, unity in the church is a miracle, one of the greatest miracles we can have, and it only happens with prayer.

Anyone know what the biggest division was when John wrote his gospel account? Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Jewish Christians looking down on the Gentiles because they were pagans. Gentile Christians looking down on Jewish Christians, maybe because ultimately it was the Jewish people that rejected Jesus and had him crucified. John is writing to a divided church, reminding them that Jesus prayed that we would be one, even as our enemies repent and accept Jesus as their savior.

And he's praying for unity here, not uniformity. What's the difference between unity and uniformity? All living for the same purpose verses all doing the same thing. Let's look at this passage in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, and we'll get ready to wrap up.

We're not all the same. We have different personalities, different skills, different passions, but we're united in Christ. We can't do this alone. Any more than an eye can go about floating in the air and seeing alone, any more than a hand can get up and start crawling around on its own. Anyone ever seen the Adam's family? That hand, that just goes walking around. If course it's silly. Paul wants us to have that image in our minds. It's as silly for us to think we can make it on our own as it is to think that a hand can crawl around on its own.

What does unity look like for you?



Proverbs 16:18-19 “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.”

I hope you had a good chance last week to really reflect on the importance of humility and the dangers of pride. And here in these proverbs we get another reminder; falling into the trap of pride sets us up for failure. Arrogance can be our worst enemy.

And let's make sure we're using the word pride in the right way here, because sometimes we use it to mean different things. Sometimes we use the term pride to celebrate a good accomplishment. Perhaps we work hard and achieve a great goal, and we feel pride; satisfaction in the work that we did. Or a parent can be proud of a child, a teacher proud of a student for their great accomplishments. There's a joy and happiness associated with such things, and those emotions are good. We should be happy when we accomplish great things.

The pride we're talking about in these proverbs is different, however. This is an arrogance, a belief that you are superior to someone else. Pride in this sense is always a comparison to others, and it's always going to make you look down on them. And that's what sets you up for failure. Like the villain that starts an arrogant monologue when he thinks he's won, only for the hero to take advantage of the moment and catch him off guard.

I love how verse 19 says you're better off being with the poor, being poor in spirit. And we've talked about that idea before when we went through the sermon on the mount, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And I can tell you, as someone who's been around both the poor and the weak, as well as the powerful and the arrogant; I would much rather be with those who are poor but know what it means to trust in God. Those who are arrogant and powerful, they may win some battles, and they'll fight amongst themselves about who gets to keep what in the spoils, but it never lasts. Pride sets them against each other, it sets them against everyone.

And today, we're certainly seeing a lot of arrogant pride around us, aren't we? Competition about who can get the most followers on social media, who can have the most expensive stuff, who has the best accomplishments. For me, it's been very interesting to see the arrogance in how people have responded to the pandemic. You guys know, I have quite a bit of medical background, probably close to 2 decades of dedicated study in science and medicine, and I know I still have so much to learn. Yet I see adults who have barely a high school level understanding of biology and medicine, convinced they know more about disease after spending a few hours googling things on the internet than people who have devoted their entire lives to studying the field. That's arrogance. Pursuit of knowledge is great, we should all seek greater wisdom and understanding in every opportunity, but to think that you've gained that kind of knowledge, that you know what treatments work, or that you've uncovered some deep conspiracy that no one else knows about, without any real work, that's just a self-centered pride. And we'll see more of it in the years to come. And people like that, in the end the harm they bring is all on themselves. Their pride cuts them off from the people they can really learn from, and they'll turn away from anyone who says something they don't want to hear.

So let's not follow that path. We'll seek humility above all else, and on that path there is great wisdom to be found. Don't let pride trip you up.



## Read 2 Kings 13:14-19

Glad to be back from my Haiti trip, good to see you all, happy to be sharing from God's word today. So, I'm going to do my best to stick to my notes, because I know if I start going too far off from them and start just talking, we'll be here for like 2 or 3 hours. That's the disadvantage of having me preach the week after getting back from Haiti; I'm still a little supercharged and can kind of have a tendency to just...well, anyway, focus on the sermon. And, let me start off with a little question for you to think about. What would you do if God came down and promised you a victory. Any victory, anything you wanted. The next thing you did, you would completely succeed at. Would you start a business? Go back to college to get a cool degree? Just buy a lottery ticket? Would you start a church? Would you find a big stadium, fill it with ten thousand people, and give a sermon to them. Would you go out to a forgotten people in a foreign land who have no hope, and share God's word with them? And how far would you be willing to go to pursue that victory? Keep those questions in mind, as we jump into our story here.

So, prophet Elisha, a little history background. We're talking a little after 800 BC here. 800 years before Jesus. We're looking at the guy who took over for the prophet Elijah. These guys were prophets during some of the toughest times of the nation of Israel. They were active during the times of Ahab and Jezebel, when prophets of God were actively being hunted and killed in the northern kingdom of Israel. The kingdom had been split in two since the days of Solomon, with the southern kingdom of Judah usually being a little closer to God than the northern kingdom of Israel. Elisha was a prophet operating in the northern kingdom with a lot of power. A lot of miracles, healing, bringing people back to life, multiplying food, taking out entire armies, you know, normal prophet stuff. He took over for Elijah; again, powerful prophet, the guy who went up against 850 prophets of Jezebel's gods. It was a tough life though; always feeling alone, always being outnumbered, always having someone out there that wants to kill you. So God brings in Elisha to follow Elijah, learn from him support him. And Elijah keeps going, fighting the good fight, running the race, until his time is done.

On Elijah's last day, Elisha would not leave his side, follows him everywhere, and asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, of his power. And he gets it, and goes with it. We get this cool scene with Elijah being taken up to heaven in chariots of fire, and now it's Elisha's turn to go to work. But now we get to the end of Elisha's life. He's fought the good fight, he ran the race, and now it's his time to move on to the reward. And sure enough, we have another guy here with him, Jehoash the king of Israel. It's a little interesting that Jehoash is here crying over Elisha. It's interesting because there's nothing about Jehoash that demonstrates that he cares at all about God. Bible says very little about him. All we know is he lasted 16 years and did evil in the eyes of the Lord. There's one battle recorded where he fought against the southern kingdom of Judah when Amaziah was king there, and then we have this story.

It raises an interesting question, doesn't it? Why would a king who has no interest in God or God's commands, be there at the death of a prophet weeping for him? The Bible doesn't say why he's there, but I do have a guess. I'm sure the people at this time know the history of Elijah and Elisha. Elisha is walking by Elijah, sees those flaming chariots coming, and cries out "My father, my father, the chariots and horseman of Israel!" And here we have Jehoash, here at the death of Elisha, calling out "My father, my father, the chariots and horseman of Israel." Some people think that's it's just a reference to the military advantage of having a prophet on your country's side, kind of like a "oh no, what will our armies do if you aren't here" kind of thing. Maybe. You know what I think? I think Jehoash was there because

he knows that Elisha was with Elijah when he inherited his power. I think Jehoash is thinking "If you're with a prophet when he dies, and you say the right magic words, you get super powers." I think Jehoash is at least aware that Elisha has some kind of power, and he's there trying to get at least some of it. He isn't interested in Elisha, isn't interested in God, isn't interested in seeking God's direction for his life; he's there to get some kind of power.

So, what does this scene look like? We have a good archer here? Who's my volunteer? So, you take the arrow, the Lord's arrow of victory, and then you shoot. Then you take the arrows, and strike the ground three times. And he stops, and looks at Elisha. Elisha just shakes his head. Really, only three times? Ok that's great, you can sit down. Awesome job. You see, I think we're all a little like Jehoash here. We'll show up, we'll take a little direction from God, He says go forward, and we take like one or two steps and turn back and say, ok God, is this good? No no no, go forward. Two more steps. Ok, we good here? We show up, but we just stay on the edge, never really committing, never really sure what we believe. I've found that's true for a lot of people actually. They go through some motions, know a few of the words to say, but most people you meet don't really know what they believe. They'll identify with one religion or another, or say they're an atheist, but they've never really thought through about what that would really look like in their life. So here's Jehoash, showing up, going through the motions, but missing out on the fullness of what God had to offer him. Showing up, going through the motions, but missing out on the full blessings. God's offering us a victory, but we're so focused on ourselves we don't see it. I remember one missionary I know, talked about how he had wanted to have just barely enough God in his life to get into heaven, and make all his hopes and dreams come true, without really having to change his life. He went on to become a missionary in some of the most dangerous countries in the world to share the gospel. So much for his plans, right?

If I had to take a guess, I'd say most people don't really know what real victory looks like. People think of wealth or fame or power, titles, position, worldly treasure, and they say "If I just had that, boy, I'd have it made." Of course, you know none of that stuff lasts. You could have all the money in the world, it could be gone in a day. You could be healthy one day, and dying the next. Oh yeah, I know that feeling. So what does real victory look like? What would you do if whatever you chose to do, God would grant you success? Start a business? Get a degree? Buy a lottery ticket. Build a church? Preach a sermon? Go out to a forgotten people in a foreign land who have no hope, and share God's word with them?

You guys seen any of my pictures from the Haiti trip yet? Check it out

I think we all know, real victory isn't something as superficial as getting a lot of money or becoming really famous. We're not looking for a little victory over some army, we're looking to heaven, to an eternal victory. I actually want jump over to a little passage in Romans 8, verses 29 and 30

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

That's what real victory looks like, the transformation of our character. As God shapes us and molds us, and makes us look more and more like Jesus. And, I feel like I need to talk about this a little bit. I've noticed, a lot of people in our churches can get a little upset when you look at verses like this. They get uneasy when you use that word predestined. I don't know if it's a misunderstanding, or a miscommunication, or a misrepresentation, or what. I guess for some people, it conjures up this image like God is just randomly flipping coins up in heaven and deciding who's destined for this and that. I know there are some people look at this, and decide that "well, if God's already decided everything, why should I do anything?" Even arguing that there's no point in sharing the gospel with people, because God's going just save whoever he's going to save. It's like that little joke article in the Babylon Bee, you ever read that? It's a little Christian satire website, really funny, titled this one article "Calvinist Researchers Complete Development of Elect Detector" so they only share the gospel with people destined to salvation. Sounds silly, but actually a friend of mine had a story, ran into some Christians at a university, and asked them when their Bible study met, because he was interested in checking out a Bible study. They actually wouldn't tell him, and their actual logic was, "if you were meant to come to our study, you'll find it" Like, that's what they actually told him. Needless to say, he didn't go to their study, became a leader in Chi Alpha, and came to UCLA to help start the Chi Alpha group that I became a part of and travel to Haiti with.

That's not the point of these verses. These verses are a promise. They're a promise to you. To me. A promise to those of us who have put our hope in Jesus. A promise of victory. That God's going to take each of the things in your life, the ups and the downs, the right choices and the wrong choices, your success and your failure, and use them to transform your character. Listen to this very carefully, because I want to communicate this clearly: God doesn't give us the promise of victory so that we'll stay home on our couch watching football or something on the day of battle. He gives us the promise of victory so that when the day of battle comes, when the trials and the struggles and the failures attack, we'll have the courage to stand, and move forward. Let me say it again, God doesn't give us the promise of victory so that when the day of battle comes, we'll run off and hide in a corner and say "Oh, God's going to win, so I'll just hide over here". He gives us the promise of victory so that when the day of battle comes, we'll stand and endure. We're no longer held back by a fear of failure, a fear that our weaknesses are too much to overcome. No, look at verses 35 through 37

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

More than conquerors. Let that sink in. Think of conquest back then. Roman army. The Roman armies were conquerors. You met those guys on the battlefield, you're done. Forget it. They'll wipe you out. Paul is saying our victory is so great, so complete, you can't even compare us to the Roman army. We're

completely beyond them. We've won even before we've even gone out to the battlefield. That is God's promise to you who have put your trust in Him, no weapon forged against you will succeed, no giant will stop your advance, no enemy can ever take God's promise away. It's our destiny to win. If that rubs you the wrong way, if you're still not sure how to think about that, come see me and talk to me after. I'll be around. Don't send some angry email about how the guy said predestination in his sermon or something like that, sit down and talk with me, and maybe I can share some of my own experiences, some of the things God has done in my life, that has helped me understand these things a little.

So we push forward, looking toward that victory, to that transformation of our character into the likeness of Christ. You know, last summer, I was speaking at the juniors retreat at Camp Arev, and I had a little Q&A time for the kids to ask me questions. One of the kids wrote this one, completely misspelled of course, but "How does heaven look like?" What does heaven look like? It looks like this, our lives transformed, living as children of God. That's the victory that we push forward to. Paul writes about this transformation of our character like this in Philippians 3:12-16

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained."

On the one hand, we have this victory from God, this destiny. God has a direction for your life. You aren't a mistake. You aren't an afterthought, you aren't someone that God has forgotten. God has a purpose for your life, work he's prepared in advance for each of us to do. On the other hand, like we were saying all week down in Haiti, life is about choices, decisions, and consequences. On one hand, life is about the plans and purposes of God, on the other hand, life is about choices, decisions, and consequences. How those two things come together is a mystery, but don't let that discourage you or turn you away. Chase after the things of God. Press on. Don't just strike the ground 3 times, don't even strike it 6 times, keep striking until God says "Ok, that's enough, you're good."

So what does that look like in our lives? It means not just praying for a quick little 5 seconds before you eat and before you go to sleep. It means praying to connect with God, to worship him, and lift others up in prayer. Pray until you run out of things to pray about, then call someone else up and ask them how you can be praying for them. It means reading the Bible until our minds become so filled with scripture that it starts coming out of our mouths. That every word we speak is fueled by the Bible, and is spoken to heal, restore, and build. It means not just reading to memorize, but reading to understand. You could have all of scriptures memorized in the original Hebrew language, doesn't matter at all if you don't understand any of it, right? It means not just giving a little dollar here in there for offering or to someone in need, it means giving until it actually starts making you uncomfortable and thinking, can I really afford to give this much? And then, give just a little bit more. It means to speak words that lift other people up, that are carefully selected to encourage and to heal. Not gossiping, talking behind other people's backs, spreading slander and rumors that tear down someone's reputation. It means looking for God's purpose in our lives, and not just seeking out our own pleasures.

Why did Jehoshaphat stop hitting the ground at three times? Probably felt a little silly. A king, hitting the ground because an old dying guy told him to. There are going to be things that come along that will

make us want to stop. I remember that day I was talking to my first PhD advisor at UCLA, and he decided that I couldn't pursue my PhD if God was still the priority in my life. Then that choice; well, what's it going to be, PhD or church? After that meeting, I went up to the roof of the engineering building to pray. I tell you, you going through some rough times, find a good roof to go up to pray. During that season of my life, I started every morning up on that roof, a good 30 minutes just praying and worshipping. And I asked God what I should do. The answer I got from God was "Just keep doing what you're doing" I said, God, if I keep doing that, this is going to be my last quarter here. And God's response to that: "Yes, keep doing it anyway." Didn't like that answer. Put me in a bad mood the rest of that day. Sometimes God doesn't give us the answer we want, that's ok. Sure enough, at the end of that quarter, that professor kicked pretty much all of us out of his lab. It was a mess, but that's a story for another time, I'm already going way over. But I will say, that one of the questions I wrestled with during that season of my life, a season of just one setback after another, was If I come out of all this looking like a fool and a failure, but God is glorified, will I be ok with that? If people looked at my life and said, "man that guy is a lost cause, but wow, God is amazing" Learning how to keep our gaze on God, and not be sidetracked by our own reputation. Looking for the true victory, and not this trivial superficial things.

I have time for one last thing? One last little victory? One of the kids from Haiti. His name was Dickenson. I told you about him last year, didn't I? Born with HIV, got it from his mom. We got there last summer, he was 14, years old, advanced AIDS. He was just skin and bones at that point, I don't think he weighed even 60 pounds. You don't want to see a picture of what he looked like then. We prayed for him, prayed for the family, got him to the hospital and paid for his medication. Did everything we could, but I knew, when you get to that point, unless there's some crazy miracle, you don't have much longer. Not in Haiti, at least. October 27, he passed away. Now, you may say, where's the victory there? How can you say God promises victory, when you have those kinds of losses? Let me tell you something I've learned. The Bible sometimes talks about life being a battle, but it also sometimes talks about life being like a marathon. Like a race we're running. But as much as we want to finish that race all together along with our friends and family, we're not all going to get to the finish line at the same time. But even if someone gets to the finish line before you, keep running, keep pressing forward, because you know they'll be waiting for you at that finish line.

So don't just strike the ground three times, or four times. Keep striking the ground until the ground just gives way. And I know, some of you, you've been going at it, striking the ground again and again, and you don't know how much longer you can keep going. Keep your eyes fixed on God; he's going to renew your strength, and carry you forward. And some of you are maybe thinking, I can't imagine doing that, just striking the ground again and again, I don't think I can do it. I can't pray every day, I can't read the Bible every day. Alright. Just hit the ground one more time. Don't try to pray every day, just set aside 15 minutes every couple of days, to pray and seek God. If you don't think you can go to a Bible study every single week, try just once or twice a month. If you don't think you can control the words coming out of your mouth, can't be disciplined in your speech, start by trying to be disciplined in what you write. Write to people, and carefully choose words to build and lift each other up. Just try to strike the ground one more time, and see the results.

And maybe there's someone here who really isn't sure what you believe. You're hearing these stories, but you don't know what it means to be pursuing God. If that's you, come talk with me after, or any of the other leaders.

Psalm 78 is a teaching Psalm, both reflecting on the works God has done for the nation of Israel as well as stressing the importance of teaching these stories to the next generation, so they would know the power of God. The Psalm focuses on the miracles of God in bringing Israel out of Egypt, as well as the Israelites general tendency to rebel and doubt God throughout the process. We see a mixture of both mercy and judgement, as God stays faithful despite Israel's unfaithfulness.

The Psalm is written some time after the line of David is established as the royal line of Israel, and one of the points it touches on is how the tribe of Judah was chosen over Ephraim for this honor. Ephraim was Joseph's second born son, while Manasseh was the oldest. Despite this, even though traditionally the older son would receive a greater blessing, Jacob blessed Ephraim over Manasseh, and after Israel settled into the promised land the Tabernacle was set up in the Ephraim city of Shiloh. Joshua himself, the main leader after Moses, was of the tribe of Ephraim, and it would seem from this setting like Ephraim would be set up to be the major leader of the Israelites. The favored son of Joseph, the tribe of Joshua, and the land in which the Tabernacle was dwelling.

Unfortunately, Ephraim didn't stay true to its start. Along the way, the tribe seems to lose sight of the laws and wonders of God, and as a result lose the special status it has. In fact, when the nation of Israel splits into the northern and southern kingdoms after the time of Solomon, it's the northern kingdom that quickly falls into idolatry; rejecting Jerusalem as the place for worship and setting up their own idols. Going forward in Israel's history, Ephraim tends to be the tribe that represents the northern kingdom as a whole, as the leader of northern kingdom during the split was an Ephraimite, Jeroboam I. Rather than selecting a leader from the nation of Ephraim, God chooses the lowly shepherd boy of Judah to be the start of the royal line that leads to Jesus.

We see in this Psalm two important points. One; we need to always be on guard to be teaching the next generation the things of God. To often we take it for granted that children will just naturally learn the stories and experiences we were brought up with, but the reality is it takes work. There are a million things competing for our attention, and all of those things are working to pull our focus away from God.

Another important point is that we shouldn't be so focused on the status we had in the past that we forget to maintain the things that brought us that status. It didn't matter that Ephraim had the blessing of Jacob, the legacy of Joshua, and the city of Shiloh; they drifted away and abandoned the things God had given them. Today you might see churches and ministries so focused on what they used to be, or who their leaders were, that they forget to keep walking in step with the things of God.



Read 2 Kings 13:14-19

Well, it's been a couple months, but I finally get to finish the sermon I started back in April. Part one, promise of victory, part two, pursuit of victory. And these two things, they go hand in hand. As Christians, the reason we pursue victory with confidence is because we know the promises of God. You read the Bible, the Bible is filled with the promises of God.

Deuteronomy 31:6 Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

John 14:2-3 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

So let's go back to our king Jehoash and Elisha. Like I said last time, it's a little odd that this king is here. This is not a God fearing king. This isn't a guy looking to do God's will, there's nothing about his background that makes us think he wants to follow Elisha's guidance. But it seems like he's here for something. He wants to see some kind of miracle, some kind of power. And interestingly, God gives him something. A chance. God gives him a promise, and the opportunity to pursue it. But he stops. And he misses the full blessings God was offering. Maybe he was worried about how silly he would look, a king hitting the ground with arrows because an old sick guy told him to. Maybe he didn't see the connection between his actions and the promise. But either way, he missed out.

Ever have those moments of regret? If only I had done it differently, right? A lot of the time we look at our mistakes and failures in the past, and it keeps us from going forward into the promises.

Philippians 3:10-14 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Paul was in prison when he wrote this. He had a past that he wasn't proud of, a past persecuting Christians. But he understands that tomorrow is a new day. He understands that he's on a journey, and there's a destination. Some people get so caught up in their past that it becomes a prison, and it traps you. So what do you do? You focus in on the promise. That prize.

Like I said in the last sermon, we're more than conquerors. We have victory secured, because we trust in the one who has the power to save. We've won before we've even gotten onto the battle field. You ever want to see a crazy example of that in the Bible, take a look at 2 Chronicles chapter 20 if you have the time. There are three armies coming against Judah, the Israelites are completely outmatched, outnumbered. God tells them, go on out, I'm going to beat those armies. You don't even need to do anything, just go watch. The Israelites go out, they actually put the singers in front, they're singing "give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever." They get to the enemy, and as they're getting there, these three armies turn against each other, end up killing themselves off.

But what kind of victory are we chasing after? What kind of victory are we chasing after as a church? What kind of victory are you chasing after in your own life? I found this T-shirt on amazon; he who dies with the most hotwheels wins. Most tools? I think of Egyptian pharaohs burying themselves with all of their wealth, thinking that they're going to take it with them? In the end, all their treasure ended up in museums for school field trips, kids walk by it and say "This is boring, do we really have to look at all this old stuff?" The rest ended up with grave robbers, I guess. Stop and think about that, for a second. This might sound a little harsh, it might make people a little upset to hear it, but this is the truth. If everything you chase after is going to be left behind after you die, your entire life invested in the things of this world? That's an empty life you'll be living. We were meant to live for more than that. Wealth, fame, titles, strength, people keep chasing after these things. It lasts for a moment, and it's gone. People everywhere saying, "If only I had that thing, then my life would be complete. If only I had that house, if only I had that car, if only I had that degree, if only I had that promotion, that thing, that thing." And one by one we find out how empty those things are, how meaningless the victory.

What does victory look like in your life? What does it look like to pursue that victory?

2 Peter 1:3-8

<sup>3</sup>His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup>Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

<sup>5</sup>For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; <sup>6</sup>and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; <sup>7</sup>and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. <sup>8</sup>For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Man, I wish I had time to really talk about each of these things, goodness, knowledge, self control, godliness, love. But I promise I'm going to finish this sermon on time, so we'll leave that to another day. But I do want to say, here is a promise, and our response. Some of you, listen, I know you don't think you have the strength to keep going. And it's sort of true, you don't, we don't. But God's going to give you the power, he's going to give you what you need to pursue your calling. But we need to build. We're not just leaving our faith at that basic beginner level, we're adding to it daily. As God gives us power, we're transforming our character, we're putting that faith into action, and we're impacting the lives of people all around us. So we're eager, we're eager to add each of these things, because we know that this is God's promise to us. And that's the real victory; the transformation of our character.

I think I showed this picture last time I preached. That guy translating for us there, that's Daniel. He was a little kid when I first met him over 10 years ago on my first trip. Now he's one of the leaders in the area, and we're supporting him through college. Going back to the same village, the same orphanage, year after year, we've seen some great victories. Total transformation of the area, with churches planting and growing. But we've had some times that have felt like losses too. Friends we had been praying for, struggling with, and still they got called home earlier than we would have liked. Little kids,

that you would look at and think they've got so much ahead of them, and you're left looking up at God and asking "Why them? Why so young?" Sometimes it feels like you can't go forward, because the pain of the losses is too much. There was one girl that passed away a few years ago. Beautiful singing voice. Some of the girls actually went and made a music CD of her singing a bunch of songs in creole. That felt like a tough loss...but after that we started, I guess a bit of a tradition. We started singing more songs together in Creole together with our friends there, learning the words. Sorry, I'm not that good at recording, and I didn't get the whole song, but listen, can you recognize the tune?

Because he lives, I can face tomorrow. We just sang it, right? Think about the words. He holds the future, so I can face tomorrow. Think of a newborn child, facing uncertain days. I tell you, we have a lot we can be afraid of, let's be honest. There are so many things to worry about, especially here in San Francisco. Worried about whether or not your child will grow up and get a job that can pay the bills. Affording a house? 2 million, 3 million, 4 million dollars for a house. What kind of future will we have, what kind of future will our kids have here? Paying for an education, worried about student loans, what happens if something goes wrong? What happens if I get sick, and insurance won't cover it? I don't pretend to have the answers to all those fears; they're real fears. But I know we can face uncertain days, we can face the pain, we can fight the fight, because he lives.

I remember when things were toughest down at UCLA, going through the PhD. I remember that day I was talking to my first PhD advisor at UCLA, and he decided that I couldn't pursue my PhD if God was still the priority in my life. Then that choice; well, what's it going to be, PhD or church? After that meeting, I went up to the roof of the engineering building to pray. I tell you, you going through some rough times, find a good roof to go up to pray. During that season of my life, I started every morning up on that roof, a good 30 minutes just praying and worshipping. You know, I think there is a reason you often see Jesus or the disciples going up on a mountain or an upper room or a roof to pray. Because you're up there, looking down on the world, and it all seems so small. I think you get a little glimpse of what the world looks like to God, and your problems just don't seem very big anymore. And I asked God what I should do. The answer I got from God was "Just keep doing what you're doing" I said, God, if I keep doing that, this is going to be my last quarter here. And God's response to that: "Yes, keep doing it anyway." Didn't like that answer. Put me in a bad mood the rest of that day. Sometimes God doesn't give us the answer we want, that's ok. Sure enough, at the end of that quarter, that professor kicked pretty much all of us out of his lab. It was a mess, but that's a story for another time. But I will say, that one of the questions I wrestled with during that season of my life, a season of just one setback after another, was If I come out of all this looking like a fool and a failure, but God is glorified, will I be ok with that? If people looked at my life and said, "man that guy is a lost cause, but wow, God is amazing" Learning how to keep our gaze on God, and not be sidetracked by our own reputation. Looking for the true victory, and not letting fear hold us back.

You know anything about Ignatius? Bishop of Antioch in the early church. This was a guy who lived during the time of the apostles, who knew them, and saw the lives they led, as well as the deaths they died. And then 115AD, he had his own turn, arrested by the Roman government and taken to Rome to...well. Listen to what he writes as he's on his way, instructions he gives to the other Christians in Rome trying to prevent his execution:

"I'll never again have an opportunity like this to reach God. Nor will you Romans ever again have such a chance to be credited with a finer accomplishment – provided you remain silent. For if you quietly

refrain from interfering with me, I will become a crystal-clear message from God. But if you love my earthly body too much, I'll only be an incomprehensible noise."

Not all of us get to see the end of our life coming. It's hard to imagine how we'll face it, when we do see it. Ignatius saw his end coming, and rather than run from it, he saw it as his witness to the world; and the finish line for his race, knowing that there's a crown waiting for us at that finish line.

What kind of legacy will we leave behind? What does victory look like for us as a church? Is it a successful year if we just balance our budget? Just money? I can tell you how to do that, you know. Easy way to balance a church budget, guaranteed. All you have to do is sell off all the property, get rid of all staff, take all the money and put it in a big endowment fund and never touch. Just let it keep accumulating until we have a billion dollars. Now stop and think. There's a part of you that's saying, that's not what church is supposed to be, that's not victory. Because that part of you knows there's a greater purpose, a greater reason why we're here. We're here to bring a message to a world in desperate need. There are so many people out there that are desperately looking for something to hope in. They're waiting for God to do something in their lives. People looking for a miracle. And I know, there are people right here in our own church looking for a miracle right now. Some people in our church, man they need a miracle this week. Are we going to fight for them? Are we going to lift them up in prayer, be a voice of hope and encouragement? Will we leave a legacy? We look back at the lives of the apostles 2000 years later and say, "man, where would we be if it wasn't for the apostle Peter? Where would we be if it wasn't for the apostle Paul". What will they say about us a thousand years from now? Will there be people saying, "boy, where would we be if it wasn't for CACC?" Where would I be if it wasn't for Raffi? Where would I be if it wasn't for Ara? Where would I be if it wasn't for Caroline?

Last time I preached, I gave you all a challenge. Don't be like Jehoshaphat, and just strike the ground a couple of times, looking for that bare minimum you can do to make the cut. God's looking for a generation of people that aren't afraid to go all out. Who are willing to look a little foolish if it means advancing the kingdom. He's looking for a generation that is going to study his word to learn, to seek him. He's looking for a generation that's going to pray with fire. And that's why I want to stop us here. First Sunday of the month, we always have a little prayer meeting after church. I know, it's a really inconvenient time for it, there are snacks, we're socializing, we have things to go to after. I have to head down to my parents place after this. Stay and pray with us. For 5 minutes, if that's all you can do. We'll do our thing where we stand over there for a bit and we shake hands and everyone says "oh, that was a great sermon" and you pretend you weren't sleeping through it, go grab some quick snacks, a few minutes, and then come join us and pray. We'll meet in the fireside room, if it's too small, hey, we'll come over here. Because I'm serious, there are folks in our church that are in serious need of prayer. There are folks in Haiti, in Armenia, in Syria, in need of prayer. This is life and death. And you may say, "well in Haiti it's life and death, here in San Francisco, here in the US, it's not as bad" But the truth is, it's life and death here too, if you're willing to open your eyes to see it.

If there's time: 2 Kings 13:20-21

Elisha died and was buried. Now Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring. Once, while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man's body into Elisha's tomb. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet.

Crazy, right? You know, honestly, I think that's why Jehoash had gone to Elisha. He wanted to see...something. Some miracle. But he left before he had a chance to see it. Let's not make the same mistake. Let's press on, and go for the prize.

#### Pastor search committee updates

Nurses left last year, so we made a search committee, Me, Susan, Ara, Aren, and Armen

Began the process, but after a few months, it became apparent that we needed help keeping the church going, so Pastor Calvin offered to come up as interim for a few weeks each until we could find someone permanent. In the mean time, we've been advertising the position, and interviewing applicants. It's not that there's an issue with pastor Calvin, or that we don't like him, or anything like that, but the reality is you can't keep a church running with an interim pastor indefinitely, and it's a huge burden for him being away from his family for so long.

So little bit about our process for the pastor search: we started off just sitting down and looking at the needs of the church, and what we needed in a pastor. There are some unique challenges in our church, so our list includes things like having some knowledge of how to deal with a church that's as spread out as we are. We also have kind of a leadership shortage here, so looking for someone who has skill in developing leaders, stuff like that. We've had a couple applicants, and we're in the process of interviewing them. Apparently on Sunday there were some rumors going around or something that we had already decided or picked someone...not sure how that started, but right now we're hoping that we'll be done interviewing by the end of the month, and at that point we make a recommendation to the council for who we think is a good fit, then the council decides if they agree, and then traditionally you'd bring the pastor in to preach before the congregation ultimately voting on it.

We did a few things to get applicants; we included the announcement in a newsletter that goes out to each of the pastors in the union, and we've also talked to a lot of the pastors somewhat discretely, going to them and saying hey, how are things going, you saw we have a position open, right? You considering applying? Part of the reason we haven't been aggressively going "apply for the position" is we don't want to create bad relationships with other churches like we're stealing their pastor or something like that; it puts the pastor in an awkward position with their congregation, and in the end we're a church union and it kind of disrupts the comradery of union when you have bad relationships with churches.

Now, I know that a few people have been a little frustrated that we haven't made the names of the applicants known, and that's because the applicants requested that their names be kept confidential for the time being. That's not really that uncommon for pastor applications, because if we don't end up selecting them, pastors don't want to give their congregations the feeling like they don't want to be there, and we don't want to give the impression that one pastor is better than another, or this is a competition or anything like, just creates a bad environment, so we want to honor their requests. And we do have good applicants, these are pastors we like, faithful, reliable, but at the end of the day we only have the budget for one pastor here, and not a whole pastoral staff, so we're going to have to finally decide on one.

What kind of objections have you encountered to Christianity? When someone tells you, I don't like the Bible because... or I don't like Christianity because...or I don't like Christians or Jesus because...insert excuse here. Maybe you've heard the excuse, I don't like the Bible because it contradicts science. I don't like Christians because they're judgmental. I don't like Christianity because it teaches that there's a hell, and I don't like that. Back in my days at UCLA, I would love getting into discussions with people about what they believe and why. In a campus filled with brilliant minds from all kinds of backgrounds, there was no shortage of interesting conversations to be had.

But one of the interesting things I've noticed, in my conversations over the years, is that often the reason someone gives you for why they reject Jesus or the Bible, isn't the real reason they're objecting. As we would be discussing something, and I would show a few holes in their logic, often the conversation would shift a little, and they'd say something like, "yeah, but my real objection is" and then again, "well really, my issue is". That was when the conversations got really interesting, when they're no longer just regurgitating atheist arguments they found on the internet, but actually digging deeper to see what really motivates them.

This story in Acts we'll look at today is probably my favorite story in the entire Bible. Something about it, I just find it completely hilarious, while at the same time it gives us tremendous insight into human nature. How do we think, how do we act? So to set the stage here, Paul has been in Ephesus for quite a while at this point, over two years. Not only did Paul have a great preaching ministry going on daily in a lecture hall, he was also doing really unusual miracles. Even pieces of cloth that were being brought for him to touch seemed to have healing powers; people would bring...a handkerchief or apron for him to touch, and then bring that back to heal someone. People were so blown away with what he was doing, they were completely abandoning their old pagan ways. At one point, there's a moment when a bunch of people who had been practicing sorcery completely renounced it, brought over all of their sorcery scrolls and items which...modern day equivalent...together would have been worth millions of dollars. All of a sudden, they're seeing real power...this Paul guy, and the Jesus he preaches about, that's the real deal.

Then, after two years, something interesting happens. Let's look at our passage, Acts 19, verses 23 to 41

<sup>23</sup> About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. <sup>24</sup> A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. <sup>25</sup> He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. <sup>26</sup> And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. <sup>27</sup> There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."

<sup>28</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” <sup>29</sup> Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together. <sup>30</sup> Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. <sup>31</sup> Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.

<sup>32</sup> The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. <sup>33</sup> The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. <sup>34</sup> But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

<sup>35</sup> The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: “Fellow Ephesians, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? <sup>36</sup> Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. <sup>37</sup> You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. <sup>38</sup> If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. <sup>39</sup> If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. <sup>40</sup> As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.” <sup>41</sup> After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.

There are so many things in this scene that I just find completely fascinating. We’re introduced to this silversmith named Demetrius, and he is starting to have some concerns about Paul. Demetrius is seeing what’s happening in the city; people are abandoning paganism and turning to Christ. Paul is growing in influence. This crowd of people just burned an incredibly valuable stockpile of supposedly magic scrolls. This isn’t just a fad. This is a revolution. What might they be abandoning next?

Demetrius puts two and two together. A city that converts to Christianity is a city that’s not buying all these worthless metal idols to pray to. These metal workers made a lot of money selling idols, and when people stop worshipping these gods...well...there goes the business. His reaction tells us so much about human nature. He gets these other craftsmen together, gets a whole crowd together, and says, “Guys, if Paul keeps doing this, people aren’t going to worship our great goddess anymore. Side note...we’ll lose a lot of money, but that’s not the point, the real point is our goddess will be robbed...of her great divine majesty...and we’ll lose a lot of money, but that’s not the real point...the real point is...”

It’s just so human, isn’t it? I think at some level, these metal workers know they’re exploiting people. They’re taking advantage of people’s desperation, selling them worthless trinkets that will supposedly solve their problems. Are you sick? Are you in need of help? You need a god on your side. Just buy this little statue of Artemis and pray to it, and she’ll answer your prayers. It appeals to an inherent desire people have to have a god they can fit into their pocket that will give them whatever they want. Of course this is total foolishness, but it’s a delusion that comes over people when they reject God. Paul describes it in Romans 1:21-23

<sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

One of my favorite passages in Isaiah is where God Himself points out the foolishness of idol worship:

Isaiah 44:9-20

<sup>9</sup> All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. <sup>10</sup> Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit nothing? <sup>11</sup> People who do that will be put to shame; such craftsmen are only human beings. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and shame. <sup>12</sup> The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint.

<sup>13</sup> The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in human form, human form in all its glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. <sup>14</sup> He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. <sup>15</sup> It is used as fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it.

<sup>16</sup> Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." <sup>17</sup> From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me! You are my god!" <sup>18</sup> They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand.

<sup>19</sup> No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" <sup>20</sup> Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"

I just love that line. Are you going to bow down to a block of wood that you yourself cut? To a rock you carved? To an inanimate object that can't even talk? **And not only does** worshipping an idol trap us in foolishness, it takes a piece of creation that is worshipping God, because all creation worships God, it takes that piece of creation and distorts it, twists it, into something to be used to worship a figment of our imagination. What a horrible thing to do to the precious things God has created for good.

Now we may say, ha, those ancient, superstitious people, worshiping logs and rocks. We're so much smarter now. Are we though? How quickly are we to turn to foolish things that have no power to save? **You want money?** Here's the get rich quick scheme, the Ponzi scheme. Life getting you down? Just be more beautiful. Buy our beauty products, buy the latest fashion, then people will really like you. Even within the realm of Christianity, we see the prosperity gospel thriving in our culture. Want a more successful life? God wants to bless you, just send our ministry your money and God will pay you back 10 fold. Act now, our phone operators are



standing by. Don't like the situation society is in? Vote for me, donate to my political campaign, once I get into office, I'll fix all your problems.

**The world knows**, though, that when a person turns to Christ, all those lies start to lose their power. As the heart of the sinner is transformed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, it becomes harder for people like Demetrius to exploit them, and Demetrius is seeing that. So he has to act, before it's too late. I also find it amazing how easy it is for Demetrius to get this riot started. **All he has to** do is appeal to people's pride. Our great temple, our great goddess, the things we and our city are known for, they're going to lose their glory. We can't stand for this. And as the crowd chants "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" what they're really chanting is, "We're the best! Our team is number one!" For hours, they're mindlessly shouting. I just love that line in verse 32 "The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there." I love it because that's just so much like an actual riot; a crowd of angry people who aren't really sure what they're doing or why, they just know they're angry and want to show it.

It was funny, I was watching an interview this week with one of the guys who was in that January 6<sup>th</sup> riot in DC, who went in to the capitol building. Same thing. He's walking around, not really sure what he's doing or why they're there, taking pictures with his phone. The crowd moves one way, and he says "Oh, ok, I guess we're going that way now." Crowd goes over there, "Ok, I guess I'll follow them and see what happens next." Or during the black lives matter protests, as rioters who were supposedly protesting for black lives were burning down businesses owned by the very people they were claiming to help. In thousands of years, humanity hasn't changed one bit.

**Now Paul of course**, he sees a crowd and thinks, "Awesome, I'll go preach to them." Fortunately, he's traveling with some friends who have a little more common sense, and explain to him that a violent mob that wants to kill you probably isn't the group you want to walk over to and have a talk with. There's preaching with boldness, and then there's preaching with foolishness, and it's important to know where that line is.

**And to understand** a little more about this riot, you need to realize how important worship of Artemis would have been to these people. Pagan Roman culture, these gods were the center not just of mythology and religion, but community as well. Pagan rituals worshipping gods like Artemis were filled with a celebration of depravity and...shall we say...inappropriate activities...much like a modern day Pride parade here in San Francisco, or like...the recent VMA awards. And for the people that participate in those, the more people the more fun. With all these people turning to Christ and leaving that lifestyle behind, I image a lot of people are concerned they're going to lose out on some of the fun of having an entire city celebrate their depravity with them.

**And that brings** me back to that observation I shared in the very beginning. When you do a little digging, ask a few questions, you'll often find the real reason people are upset with

Christianity or the Bible is not actually the reason they first give you. Demetrius was pretending the issue was all about Artemis, and these mean Christians were taking away from Artemis' majesty. Of course the real reason for his objection was financial; he knew he was going to have a hard time exploiting people if they're turning away from his idols. And while the crowd is going ballistic over Paul, how dare he do this or say that, most of them don't seem to know who he is or what he did.

This highlights an important thing, and I might make a few people angry with this, but consider these words carefully. **You will encounter** people who will tell you, "If only Christians acted a little nicer, if only Christians stopped doing this, or started doing that, then people won't complain about them as much." "If you just talked about God's love more, then you won't have to worry about an angry mob coming after you." "If you just acted more like Jesus..." That's just...it's not true. Sure, you'll make more friends if you're kind and compassionate, but the reality is people will hate the person who follows Christ because Christ Himself is a threat to what they want, and it doesn't matter how much you act like Jesus. Jesus is a threat to the person who wants to keep others slaves to sin. **A Christian** who stands for the truth, who doesn't join the pagan crowd on their way to their "celebration" at the temple, who takes the things of God seriously, will be hated, and will be rejected by the world. Yes, you'll have some times of favor, when people leave you alone and let you worship in peace, but sooner or later a Demetrius is going to come around and realize that just by calling people to follow Christ, you're a threat to everything he wants. To the one who devotes their life to trapping people in foolishness and exploiting them, the one who sets the captives free is the greatest enemy.

We need to note here, back during this time in ancient Rome, Christians were considered the atheists. The Christians were the ones going around saying, "You know that god you have a statue of isn't real, right?" "You know that statue doesn't have any real magic powers, right?" And like I shared a few years ago when I preached on Gideon tearing down his idol, any time a Christian turns away from false gods and bad theology, that Christian is publicly declaring to anyone who worships that god "Your god can't save, I'm going elsewhere." Even if you don't say those words, that's the message you send, and people hate it when their gods are challenged. Even more, they hate it when their schemes to exploit desperate people get messed up.

That being said, we shouldn't just dismiss people when they have questions or objections. Paul was ready to go out to the whole crowd to talk theology with them, and his writings and sermons are filled with logical arguments. **Peter writes** in 1 Peter 3:15-16

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, <sup>16</sup> keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

So whether someone is challenging us for self centered reasons, or coming to us with real questions from the heart, we should always be ready to answer. Why is it we put this hope in Jesus? **You'll get the person** who is just asking you questions to see if they can find something you don't know the answer to so they can say "Ha, see, you can't answer that!" Well, I can't answer every question about nuclear physics, but that doesn't mean nuclear power plants aren't real. Actually, once, I had a friend who became a hard core atheist for a while. Started emailing me arguments against the existence of God, and he'd send me one and I'd refute it, then he'd send another and I refuted it, and after a few I noticed that the wording in the arguments, the sentence structure, this wasn't really the way my friend normally talked. So I plugged one of the arguments into google, and sure enough, all of them were from the same website; he was just copying and pasting arguments from there and sending them to me. And so I pointed that out to him, asked him if he just wanted me to proactively go down the entire list on the website instead of him just sending me them one at a time. And at that point he stopped sending them, because he didn't **actually care** about my answers, he was just hoping to find something I couldn't respond to so that he could hold it over my head. And many years later, he actually reached out to me apologizing for the way he had treated me during that phase in his life.

**Others might** say the church is outdated, we need to get with the times. Old things just don't work in the modern age. Well, the wheel is a pretty old invention, but we seem to still be using that pretty well. Sometimes the reason things stick around for thousands of years is because they actually work. And if we're perfectly honest, the things we're seeing today, the promotion of immorality, the focus on materialism, that's nothing new. It's not "modern times", it's been the same since the fall.

**You'll also get** the person who is genuinely hurting, they've gone through some traumatic experience, and they're asking the question "How can God be good with everything I've gone through?" "How can God be good with this cancer you're going through?" I get that. Why is there suffering in the world? And we can talk at the intellectual level, about sin and the fall and that our hope isn't in the things of this world but in heaven, but at the end of the day **sometime just talking** about how God has brought us through our own struggles, that Jesus suffered just like the rest of us, can show them that God really does have the power to save, even when the pain seems to be too great.

**You'll also have** people who aren't really rejecting Jesus, but they're rejecting the false representation of Jesus they've seen in society around us. Let's be honest, there's a lot of bad theology out there, and I'm not talking Hollywood or social media or things like that, a lot of bad theology that's preached from pulpits in churches. You've got the end of **legalism**, that tries to turn Christianity into a giant set of rules that need to be followed in order for us to be righteous enough to go to heaven. You have the extreme opposite end, **God loves** you just the way you are, you don't need to repent, God forgives. You have **prosperity preachers**, flying around in multimillion dollar jets, declaring that being a Christian means you'll always be wealthy and prosperous in this life. If you're not wealthy, or you're not being healed, that just means you don't have enough faith. So many people have been hurt by bad churches and bad theology, and we need to be sensitive to that when we speak the truth.

Then there's the foolishness of the modern day new apostolic movement, a lot of them showing up on programs like TBN, claiming to be prophets and making just, absurd predictions. Lara and I were actually watching a video last week of a compilation of all these absurd prophecies, like declaring an end to the pandemic, predicting that Trump would win the 2020 election, predicting weather and storms and stuff, none of which came true. Yet these supposed prophets still have huge crowds following them, still make a huge profit from their teachings...oh...hmm...maybe they're just mixing up the words prophet...they call themselves prophets because the profit...well, nevermind, not important.

The important thing is that the world does see this foolishness, and some people will think that's Christianity. So often Christians use this as an excuse to be timid, and not speak up, because they don't want to be associated with these false teachings. The truth is, our attitude should be the exact opposite; the existence of all this bad theology should make us even more motivated to speak up and share who Jesus really is. If not us, who else? As Paul writes in **Romans 10:14-15**

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? <sup>15</sup> And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

And, one final thought I want to end on. Over the years I've had lots of opportunities to share the gospel, talk theology, debate philosophies all over the place. Discussions with Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, atheists and we've had great discussions. Never once have I had someone that I actually sat down and talked with claim to be offended or say that I was intolerant, or anything like that. Occasionally I've had the folks who were just very...self righteous, and just waved me off simply because I was a Christian and they already hated Christians, but that was actually pretty rare. Honestly, the most "offense" I've gotten, is from other Christians; people who attend church regularly, complaining that I'll offend people if I share the gospel. That we need to keep to ourselves so we don't upset people. Christians have so internalized this concept of being "offended" or being worried that we'd be associated with bad examples of Christianity, that they tuck into a shell and try to hide their Christian faith. Maybe they've had bad experiences, maybe they're a little intimidated, maybe they're worried about starting their own riot, but...**look how our story in Acts ends**. Demetrius gets this whole crowd into a riot, storm the theater...and then the city clerk comes over and says, "You're all being stupid, stop it, go home" and nothing came out of it. They didn't get Paul, they didn't stop the growth of the church, they just all walked away feeling like idiots. When push came to shove, not one of them could bring forward any real accusation against the Christians in Ephesus.

How do we respond to a world filled with guys like Demetrius? Be ready to give a defense for your faith. Know Christ deeply, know the Bible, know good theology, so that we can proclaim to a world in need of hope that there is a savior. The world may come at us with riots, but we're responding with a revolution.

Main passage: John 20:24-31

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas (also known as Didymus<sup>[a]</sup>), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

<sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

<sup>30</sup> Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written that you may believe<sup>[b]</sup> that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The entire history of creation was leading up to this point. From the fall of Adam, to the choosing of Abraham; from the rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt to their return from the exile to Babylon, everything was leading up to this moment. The death and resurrection of Jesus. The sacrifice that saves every one of us who put our faith in God. It's a story you can read over and over again and not get bored. There's so much emotion in the story, as we go from doubt and fear to hope and courage. We see in the different gospels that the disciples had a hard time believing Jesus had really come back to life. Often we criticize Thomas the most, because of this story we just read. A lot of people focus on Thomas and say, “We shouldn't be like Thomas because he was doubting.” The truth is all the disciples had doubts in the beginning. Look at the version in Mark 16:9-14

Mark 16:9-14

<sup>9</sup> When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. <sup>10</sup> She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. <sup>11</sup> When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

*<sup>12</sup>Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. <sup>13</sup>These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.*

*<sup>14</sup>Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.*

Let's look also at Luke 24:36-45

<sup>36</sup> While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

<sup>37</sup> They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. <sup>38</sup> He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? <sup>39</sup> Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

<sup>40</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. <sup>41</sup> And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate it in their presence.

<sup>44</sup> He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

Look at his hands and feet. I find it very interesting that thing Thomas wants to see are the scars. Do you see that? He doesn't want to see Jesus do a miracle. He doesn't want to listen to Jesus preach a sermon. He's only going to believe if he see the scars.

Scars are something I think about a lot. Before I talk more about Thomas and Jesus, I want to share a little bit about myself. I was 15 years old when my life completely changed. Up until that point, I was just a normal kid. I went to school and studied hard to get good grades. I had been having a lot of pain in my back for a few months, but we didn't think it was that serious. When the pain got worse, eventually I went to the doctor to figure out what was wrong. I remember that day so clearly. That day we learned that the reason I had pain was because I had cancer. It had spread throughout my entire body, and almost destroyed my spine. The doctors thought I wouldn't be able to walk. But praise God, after a year of treatment, not only was the cancer gone, but I was still able to walk. It's strange to think about, because normally children don't think much about death. When we're young, we're focus on the bright future

we have in front of us. I was just enjoying my life. I had no idea that my life was in such danger.

You can actually still feel a little dent in my back where I'm missing part of my spine. I have a lot of scars on my back for the surgeries I had. I have some scars on my chest from where the doctors gave me the medicine I needed to survive. For many years after that, I always tried to hide those scars. I didn't want anyone to see them. Even though people knew that I had almost died, I didn't want there to be anything to remind me about it. I don't know how it is here, but in the US there are a lot of people like that. People are ashamed of their scars. They do so many things to hide them. Scars are a reminder of the pain we went through. They're a reminder that our bodies aren't perfect. I think there is a part of each of us that know that God created us to be perfect and holy. Maybe we don't like scars because they're a reminder that we're not perfect. They remind us of our failures.

And here we have Jesus coming back to life with scars. Normally our picture of resurrection is with a new, perfect, glorified body. Read what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:35-57

<sup>35</sup> But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" <sup>36</sup> How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. <sup>37</sup> When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. <sup>38</sup> But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. <sup>39</sup> Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. <sup>40</sup> There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. <sup>41</sup> The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

<sup>42</sup> So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; <sup>43</sup> it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; <sup>44</sup> it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. <sup>45</sup> So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"<sup>[1]</sup>; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. <sup>46</sup> The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. <sup>47</sup> The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. <sup>48</sup> As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. <sup>49</sup> And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we<sup>[2]</sup> bear the image of the heavenly man.

<sup>50</sup> I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. <sup>51</sup> Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— <sup>52</sup> in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup> For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. <sup>54</sup> When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."<sup>[h]</sup>

<sup>55</sup> "Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"<sup>[i]</sup>

<sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible promises that we will be brought back with new bodies that won't grow old or get sick. All of those old scars of mine will be gone and forgotten. Isn't it interesting though, that Jesus keeps his scars. He still has holes in his hands where the nails went through. He still has a hole in his side where a spear pierced all the way to his heart. Let's look at one more passage in Revelation 5:1-11

**5** Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. <sup>2</sup> And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" <sup>3</sup> But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. <sup>4</sup> I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. <sup>5</sup> Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

<sup>6</sup> Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits<sup>[a]</sup> of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup> He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. <sup>8</sup> And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. <sup>9</sup> And they sang a new song, saying:

"You are worthy to take the scroll

and to open its seals,

because you were slain,

and with your blood you purchased for God

persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.



<sup>10</sup>You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
and they will reign<sup>[b]</sup> on the earth.”

There are so many beautiful things in this vision John has of heaven. People from every language and nation, worshipping God together in total unity. But look at this lion. A lion that is also a lamb. Of course we know this is Jesus. But what I find amazing is that he looks like he has been slain. There’s some kind of mark, or some kind of scar. Do you ever think about that? We usually think of Jesus as the conquering king, clothed in white and in glory. Yet in John’s vision of heaven, there’s something else. Even in heaven, we can see the suffering that he went through for us. We can still see that he had been slain.

Perhaps someone might see it as a weakness. We don’t like our own scars. Someone might ask why we would worship a God who was killed. But these scars tell us something greater. The scars are like a love letter given to us by someone who cares about us. Look at Isaiah 53:

Who has believed our message  
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

<sup>2</sup>He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

<sup>3</sup>He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

<sup>4</sup>Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup>But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.

<sup>6</sup>We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;

and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

<sup>7</sup>He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

<sup>8</sup>By oppression<sup>[a]</sup> and judgment he was taken away.  
Yet who of his generation protested?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was punished.<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>9</sup>He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  
and with the rich in his death,  
though he had done no violence,  
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

<sup>10</sup>Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,  
and though the LORD makes<sup>[c]</sup> his life an offering for sin,  
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,  
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

<sup>11</sup>After he has suffered,  
he will see the light of life<sup>[d]</sup> and be satisfied<sup>[e]</sup>;  
by his knowledge<sup>[f]</sup> my righteous servant will justify many,  
and he will bear their iniquities.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,<sup>[g]</sup>  
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,<sup>[h]</sup>  
because he poured out his life unto death,  
and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many,  
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Every time we look at the scars on Jesus, we're looking at his love for us. We all at one point had been separated from God because of our sin. Now through this sacrifice we are brought near to him. I wonder if Thomas realized that. When he demanded to see the scars on Jesus, what he was really demanding to see was the proof of God's love for him. Isn't that what we all feel sometimes? Don't we sometimes go through life with that question "God, do you see me?" "God, do you really love me?" And what does Jesus do? He answers Thomas' prayer.

Maybe some people would want to criticize Thomas for this. The truth is, I have felt like Thomas at many times in my life. Times when the pain and the struggles are so great, that we don't know if we can go forward. I think also of Moses in Exodus 33, when God tells them to go start going into the promised land. God was angry with them, because they had rebelled against them, so God says that He will not go with them. Moses cries out to God and says "If you won't go with us, don't send us." Moses wants to know that God is close to them, that God is watching over them. Isn't that what we want too? Isn't that what Thomas wants?

Thomas demands to see the scars, and Jesus comes to him. In the moment when Thomas is at his lowest, Jesus comes with the proof of his love. He does exactly what Thomas needs to restore his hope. He does the same for us when we cry out to him. Those scars are a sign that his love for us knows no limitations. That he endured great pain and suffering for each one of us.

## Seeing the Unseen

There's a very interesting scene in 2 Kings chapter 6. The Syrian army sets out to capture the prophet Elisha, hoping to prevent him from helping the armies of Israel. They surround the city he's staying in, and as they're getting ready to move in Elisha's servant sees them and runs to warn Elisha. The situation looks pretty desperate, how are they going to escape this massive army? Elisha stops him, and says "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." He then prays that God would open the eyes of his servant to see the true situation, and when he looks out, he realizes all the surrounding hills are filled with flaming chariots and forces of heaven. God's invisible army had the Syrian army completely surrounded. Needless to say, the battle did not go well for the Syrians.

This is good story to reflect on as we're continuing through Genesis 42 and 43. This week we find Jacob very discouraged; Simeon is in prison in Egypt, and he's forced to send Benjamin with the rest of the brothers to secure his release. Thinking about how he already lost Joseph, he's not sure if he can handle losing another son. From his perspective, things look pretty hopeless. The thing is, he's focused entirely on the situation from a worldly perspective. He's focused on the danger around him, not God's protection over him. Just like Elisha's servant, he didn't see the forces that were on his side. If he had seen things from God's perspective, he would have realized he was sending Benjamin to a place where he would be completely safe; to be reunited with his brother Joseph. The reality was there was absolutely no danger at all; Joseph would be ensuring that all of his brothers would be safe.

As Christians, it's really important for us to fix our eyes on the things that are unseen, rather than the things that are seen. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 says <sup>16</sup>Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup>So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

When our eyes are focused on the seen things, we're focused on our problems and our limitations. We'll miss out on a lot of the solutions and opportunities God might be giving us. Fixing our eyes on what's unseen means thinking about God's promises about the future. It means spending time in prayer, asking God to guide us in His will. It means finding our joy in the work God is continually doing in our hearts, transforming our character, rather than finding our joy in our worldly wealth and status. Wealth, power, conflicts, sickness, all those things are temporary things that we can see, but they won't last. The important, eternal things we can't really see, it's not like I can hold salvation in my hands, but the reality is those eternal things are what matter most.

If Jacob had been spending the necessary time in prayer and seeking God's will, he might have realized that God was working some important plans through all of this. In the end, all of this was working out for his salvation, and the salvation of his family. And you know what? For those of us that have put our trust in Jesus, God is also working things out for our salvation. So let's fix our eyes on the promises, and not get distracted by the problems of this world.



Luke 5:27-31

<sup>27</sup> After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, <sup>28</sup> and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

<sup>29</sup> Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. <sup>30</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

<sup>31</sup> Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>32</sup> I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Well, here we are, this is my lab at my university. I teach medical diagnostics here, chemistry, math, and biology. All the equipment you see here is for doing different tests on someone's blood. All the kinds of things you need to know in order to diagnosis a patient in the hospital. Our goal is to help sick people become healthy.

There were a lot of people that wanted attention from Jesus whenever he went anywhere. Some people wanted to be healed, some people wanted to just listen to what he said, and maybe other people were just bored and wanted to see something interesting. Here we find Jesus running into a tax collector. The job of the tax collector was...to collect taxes for the Roman government. Unfortunately, they weren't particularly honest people; they would often collect a lot more money from people than they needed to, and would keep the extra money for themselves. As long as they gave enough taxes to the Rome, the government didn't really care how much extra money they forced people to pay.

You can imagine, that made a lot of people angry. People didn't like tax collectors, and didn't want to be around them. Tax collectors were sinners, they were bad people, and the way you treat sinners is by being mean to them. Yet here is Jesus, telling one to follow him. He's actually going to his house and eating with him. Not just one tax collector, Jesus is getting together with a whole bunch of them. Why would Jesus do that?

I'm sure you've noticed that we live in a world filled with people who are always trying to show they're better than everyone else. We see that all around us, don't we? People who love to point out everything you do wrong, every mistake you've made, and meanwhile they like to brag about themselves. That's kind of what the Pharisees during Jesus' time were like. It was really important to them to show that they were better than other people. They wanted to seem like they were more holy, more righteous. And sometimes they wanted Jesus around them, even though they didn't like him. Why? Because Jesus was becoming an admired teacher, and some of them thought they might be able to take advantage of that. They'd be able to brag to people, yeah, I know Jesus, he came to my house. See what a righteous and holy person I am? People are strange like that. On one hand, some religious leaders wanted to

denounce Jesus, and get people to stop liking him. On the other hand, when they saw that people liked him, they wanted to take advantage of it. It's funny how confusing people can be at times, isn't it?

Here, they might be upset because Jesus is spending time with tax collectors rather than them. Jesus is spending his time with the lowest, most rejected people in society, and not the wealthy and the powerful. With this little metaphor about doctors and health, Jesus is saying he wants to be around the people who need him most. He wants to be teaching the people who don't have a chance to read the Bible, the people who don't know what God's word says. He wants the chance to teach them that they way they've been living their lives, stealing money from people, has been wrong, but also show them they have a chance to change their ways and start doing what's right. He wants them to repent.

Of course, the pharisees were just as sinful as the tax collectors; full of pride and greed, but they didn't want to admit it. They wanted to keep pretending they were better than everyone else. So Jesus tells them; if you don't want to admit there's anything wrong with you, then I'm going to spend my time with people who realize they need to change. It's a challenge to each of us, not to be arrogant and claim to be perfect. If we want Jesus to change us, we need to be willing to admit that we actually have things in our lives we need to change. Maybe it's pride, or greed, or hatred. Maybe we're just discouraged, or we worry too much about the future. Whatever it is, Jesus is saying he's the doctor who can actually fix it. I may teach students here how to heal someone's body, but Jesus is the one who heals our souls. He's waiting for us to call out to him, all we have to do is ask.

Hope everyone is doing well this week. Just two weeks left in our series, and maybe when we're done we can get together on a Sunday at the end of the month for a little outdoor adventure. In the mean time, I'm praying for all of you, and as always, if you ever need anything I'm just one phone call away.

Whenever Jesus talks about doctors, you always wonder how good their medical care actually was back then. Would I trust an ancient Roman doctor to perform surgery on me. But I looked up, and apparently they did actually have a giant book of medicinal plants and other items called *De Materia Medica* – On Medical materials. Apparently it included everything from apples to parsley to...garlic, and even some stuff that might have been zinc or iron, which you can actually use to treat some disorders. And apparently it was widely used for over 1500 years, so maybe it's worth checking out. Who knows, maybe we'll find a cure for COVID in there somewhere.

We're continuing through Proverbs this week, and this time we're going to look at some advice Proverbs has about dealing with sins and temptations. It's especially challenging in today's culture, because there is no shortage of influences trying to lead us down crooked paths. In chapter 9 of Proverbs, we have a picture of two people calling out to everyone walking by, one is Wisdom, and the other is Folly. Interestingly, they're both saying the same line; "Whoever is simple, let him come here" Yet look at what Folly says in verses 13-18

Proverbs 9:13-18

<sup>13</sup> Folly is an unruly woman; she is simple and knows nothing. <sup>14</sup> She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city, <sup>15</sup> calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way, <sup>16</sup> "Let all who are simple come to my house!" To those who have no sense she says, <sup>17</sup> "Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!" <sup>18</sup> But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.

Both Wisdom and Folly are calling out, but Wisdom is leading people to life while Folly is leading them to death. Folly tells people that there's nothing wrong with stealing and deception. Take advantage of people whenever you can. This image we have in this passage reminds us that we need to be on guard against influences that are trying to deceive us onto a destructive path. And to be on guard, we need wisdom to recognize truth from lies. And the proverbs are great for this. Let's take a look at a few.

Proverbs 15:28 – The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

One of the ways we can identify when someone is trying to lie to us, or lead us astray, is paying attention to how they answer us. Do they stop and ponder before they answer, or are they quick to throw out insults and profanities? In the same way a tree can't have two different kinds of fruit on it, seeing evil come out of someone's speech can tell you not to expect too much from them in terms of good advice or good morals, or truth in general.

On that note - Proverbs 12:19 Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.

Perhaps a common modern day version of this proverb is something like "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." Lying is one of the most common temptations we run into in our daily lives, and this is a reminder that lies never pay off in the long run. At some point, things fall apart, so just don't go down that road.

And then there's Proverbs 14:21 – Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor.

This is a huge problem in our society today, a lot of people despising their neighbors, even their own family, over things like politics, or race, or which sports team they like to root for. As followers of Jesus, we're called to be generous to our neighbors, even the poorest ones who can't pay us back. In a society filled with greed and selfishness, the question in our heart always



needs to be "How can I help this person" Sometimes...we can't help, but even then we can still pray for them. And the more we do that, the more we can resist the call of those around us to hate.

Expanding off of that, Proverbs 16:29 – A man of violence entices his neighbor and leads him in a way that is not good.

We live in a culture that really does enjoy violence. Our entertainment is filled it, and our country as a whole always seems to be fighting wars without much of a sense of why we're doing it. We have cities with incredibly high violent crime rates, and a huge percentage of our population thinks it's a fundamental right of a parent to kill their own children before their born just so they don't have to deal with having kids. For someone who loves violence, power is everything, so they're always going to try to attract allies and followers who will also fight alongside them, and they're always trying to stoke anger among others. Be on guard, because a love of violence is very contagious. There are times when we do need to fight against evil, but our hearts should never delight in it.

Then there's kind of the opposite end: Proverbs 21:17 – Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.

This is also something we see in our culture around us, isn't it? A love of pleasure. Now, there's nothing wrong with be comfortable, or having fun. We're not supposed to be living in constant suffering and agony. But when that love of pleasure takes priority over everything else, we find ourselves in a dangerous trap. That's when it becomes a sin that takes control of us. For some people this can be drugs and alcohol. For others it can be expensive, luxurious things. It can also be chasing after unhealthy romantic relationships, dating and sleeping around with whoever they can find. Now this doesn't always leave someone poor, but a lot of the time it does, and even when it doesn't you'll find their life eventually suffers as a result when they become a slave to the thing they're chasing.

Now, there's so many more we can talk about, and a lot that are in your devotionals this week, but I actually want to leave us with this final thought.

Proverbs 20:9 Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin"?

At the end of the day, it really is true that we've all committed sins and we're all going to commit sins in the future. We can't say that we've kept our hearts pure; that's why we need Jesus. We needed someone who could pay the price for our forgiveness and make us clean. And it's because of our need that we shouldn't be judgmental of ourselves or others when we fall into sin. Instead our heart should always be to draw closer to Jesus, to seek forgiveness and restoration. And day by day, we'll grow in the wisdom and power to resist sin more.



## Luke 8:4-8

<sup>4</sup> While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: <sup>5</sup> “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. <sup>6</sup> Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.”

When he said this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

At this point in the life of Jesus, he has done a lot of things. He’s preached a lot of sermons, healed a lot of people, and there are people who are following him wherever he goes. His disciples are expecting to see even more spectacular things from him, because they believe he’s the messiah they’ve been waiting for. But something is starting to confuse them. Jesus will do an amazing miracle, preach a great sermon, and people will watch, and then they’ll leave and go home like nothing ever happened. The religious leaders would come, complain about Jesus, and then leave and go home. If Jesus was the messiah they were waiting for, why were so many people rejecting him?

Jesus is telling his disciples this parable to help them understand why some people are rejecting his teaching. In this parable, Jesus describes 4 different types of soil that represents 4 different types of people. Each type of soil gets the same seed, each person hears the same message, but all 4 respond to it differently. The hard path represents those who have hard hearts. They’re full of pride, and they don’t like it when Jesus calls them out on their hypocrisy. These would be like the religious leaders during his time. They were wealthy, and powerful, and they cared more about their public image than who they were on the inside. Everything they did was for show. They didn’t have room for God’s word in their hearts; it never affected them. It couldn’t even take root.

The next type is the shallow, rocky ground. These are people who like the things that Jesus says...at first. They like the miracles, they like being healed, and they’re willing to follow Jesus as long as they can get something out of it. But the words of Jesus are never really taking root in their lives; as soon as there’s difficulty or suffering as a result of being around Jesus, they quickly turn away to something else. Many of Jesus’ followers faced a lot of persecution; even just admitting that Jesus had healed you could get you in trouble in some places. A lot of people weren’t willing to face that, so they never let themselves get too drawn in to what Jesus was teaching.

The third type of soil is the one covered in thorns. These are people that like some of the things Jesus says, they’ll follow him and maybe try to apply a few things he teaches, but they’re so focused on the other things in life that they can’t make Jesus the priority. When something else

comes up, they're off to focus on that other thing. The thorns represent the worries and concerns of life, chasing after wealth, or pleasure, and it takes priority over God's word.

The last type of soil represents those who have room in their hearts for what Jesus has to say. They hear the message, and it changes them completely. It doesn't just produce a little plant, it produces an actual harvest that impacts not only their own lives but the lives of others as well. The good soil represents the people who truly become disciples of Jesus.

I remember when I first heard this parable, I asked myself what kind of soil I was. It's important for us to examine our own lives and see if there are things preventing God's word from really growing and producing a harvest in us. Sometimes it's pride, that hardens our hearts. Sometimes it's a fear of how other people will treat us, or the suffering we might face by following Jesus. Sometimes it's focusing so much on the material things of this world that we don't have time for God. When we see those things in our lives, we should pray and ask God to make more room for Him in our hearts. When we do that, God's word starts to grow in us; transforming us ultimately producing something that changes not only us but also affects the people around us. That's the harvest of eternal life.

This parable is a reminder to each of us not to be discouraged when we see other people rejecting the messages Jesus teaches. Jesus was encouraging his disciples to not lose heart just because there were hearts that weren't receptive to the messages they were sharing. Instead, we need to make room for God's word to grow in our own hearts, and pray that God will equip us to share his word with others.

Hope everyone has been having a great week. Let me know if there's anyway I can be praying for you, and looking forward to seeing you on Sunday to talk about one of the most important parables Jesus teaches: the parable of the unmerciful servant. As always, if you ever need anything, I'm just one phone call away.

Well, it's been a while since I've done the stick figure videos. Stick figure animations are nice because I can add all the characters I want and I don't need to worry about the costumes or the props. I can change the weather, make lightening, anything...the downside is it just takes too much time to make the pictures.

Start with singing “when the dog bites when the bee stings when I’m feeling sad I simply remember my favorite things and then I don’t feel so bad.”

Lara

In the classic musical, Sound of Music, we find a musically talented nun, Maria von trapp, coming to the home of a widowed captain to help raise the children and keep the home running smoothly. Things are difficult at first; the captain has become hardened and strict after the loss of his wife, and there is very little joy in the home. Yet Maria slowly transforms the home as she brings music back, reminding the family that music uplifts the soul and allows us to persevere.

Matt

We’ve been talking about how Jesus is king in this series, and one of the ways we worship this king is through song. Music is a gift from God that allows us to connect with God more deeply, as our hearts and our voices align to direct attention to God.

We were made to worship. It’s the key to our hearts and how our souls are wired. It’s a thirst, and deep longing god has placed inside every human. And god has a purpose for it separate from his own praise: When we plug in to the Lord’s charging power by spending time with him, the very act of worship changes us and transforms our hearts to be more Christlike. It does so by intentionally focusing our time and hearts on the important things - the glory of god, adoring him in all his majesty, and praising him for his creation and love for us. When Moses spent time one on one with god on the mountain, he came back down with a glowing countenance-one that reflected the beauty and radiant glory of the god whom he had just worshipped. I think you’ve all probably had similar experiences where you’ve spent precious intimate time with the Lord and you leave with your face shining radiantly with great joy and Christlike hope. We can also think here of our own mountain top experiences, maybe at camp arev. These times of deep worship and communion with god and his people grow our faith and make us holier.

Lara

Another beautiful side effect is that a worship centered day and life helps you cope with and heal from your current or past suffering. It does so by shifting our focus away from temporal earthly things to the longlasting and permanent eternal gifts and love god has in store for us. In chapter 16 of Acts, we find Paul and Silas in prison, falsely accused of causing a huge disturbance in the city. But look at verse 25:

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”

Beaten and chained, they're singing praises to God, and everyone around them is listening. In times of great distress, singing these songs of worship helps us persevere, and encourages others around us as well.

Matt

Ephesians 5:19-20 has an important challenge for each of us:

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Singing isn't just for us, it's also part of how we interact with others and remind them of the goodness of God.

Lara-

One of the most well known songs in the sound of music is that song about favorite things. Think about your favorite things and then you don't feel so bad. Of course, the things Maria lists, snowflakes and whiskers on kittens are not really the powerful things that truly give us hope in the hardships of life. The things we sing about as Christians are the attributes and victories of God; God who rescues the sinner, Jesus who conquers death. As we sing these words, we remind ourselves that God is greater than our circumstances.

Matt

You guys know I go to Haiti pretty regularly, and one of our favorite hymns to sing together when we're there is Because He Lives. Because he lives, I can face tomorrow, because he lives, all fear is gone, because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives.

In moments of despair and grief, when it seems like there's no point in trying any more, those words give hope. So as we sing in church, think about these good things. Let them encourage you and ground you, as we continue to follow Jesus as our king.

Lara

So you want to know how to worship? It's easy, let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start. When you read you begin with ABC, when you praise you begin with Do Re Me.

We were continuing through Colossians this week, and this time we were looking at God's instructions for how we should interact in our families. It can be a real challenge, because while on one hand our families are typically the ones who love us the most, they can also be the ones who annoy us the most. Right? Conflicts pop up, we disagree on things, and sometimes we get frustrated with each other. So we might look for a good example of what a family should be, and try to model things after that. Interesting thing though, if you look through the Bible, look at different families, you almost never see stories about good, healthy families. Almost every family that the Bible goes into detail describing, from the beginning of Genesis to the Babylonian Exile, has a lot of problems, major issues. We saw that last week with Jehoram and Athaliah, didn't we?

As I was thinking about this though, one story in the Bible came to mind. A small, little known book, about a seemingly insignificant woman named Ruth. This was a long time ago, a few generations before king David came along. A Jewish couple, Elimelech and Naomi, and their two sons decide to leave their home town of Bethlehem during a famine and move to the nearby land of Moab. While they live in Moab, the two sons get married, and things seem to be going pretty well at first. But then tragedy hits, Elimelech dies, leaving his wife a widow. Then things get even worse, both these sons die, and now Naomi and her two daughters-in-law are left alone as widows. Naomi, she's just a wreck, and decides its time to go back home to Bethlehem and see if she can at least find food there and not starve. She turns to her daughters-in-law, and tells them to just leave her, go back to their land of Moab, go back to their friends and families, and try to start life over again. At first the both say no, they want to go with her, but eventually one of them agrees to go back home.

However, the other one insists on staying with her mother in law. Her name was Ruth. Listen to what she says in Ruth 1:16-18

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Ruth has an amazing attitude here. After everything the family has been through, she could have very easily gotten bitter and discouraged, maybe blaming her mother-in-law for the way things turned out, or even blaming God. Instead, she doubles down on her commitment to her new family, who at this point is just Naomi. No matter what happens, she made a promise to be a part of this family when she got married, and she's not going to abandon her mother-in-law when she's in need.

Family is an important thing; it's where we first learn the notion that we have an obligation to someone other than ourselves. We really need to remember this, because we live in a society that increasingly tells us that we should always be putting ourselves first, that our only real

obligation is the obligation to make ourselves happy. But as I've said to you guys in the past, one of the things you'll find in life, is that it's your responsibilities, your obligations, the people who are depending on you, that really give you joy and purpose day by day. Yes, it's tiring, it's difficult, we want to give up some times. A child throws a tantrum, and a parent gets frustrated. A parent sets a rule you don't like, maybe insists you do some chores around the house, and you get angry because you just want to go outside and play with your friends. But take your family obligations seriously, submit to one another, and you'll find incredible joy hidden in the work.

The story of Ruth is a fascinating one for several reasons. For one, we never actually see God show up anywhere, not directly anyway. God doesn't say anything, there aren't any spectacular miracles, no prophets come by to bring an important message. Just people doing their best to do the right thing in difficult circumstances. But it's a tragedy that turns into a love story. As Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem, Ruth goes out to see if she can find food for them to eat during harvest time. Back in those times, rather than having food banks or homeless shelters or government programs, God had given instructions to farmers to leave just a little of their crops behind whenever there was a harvest, so that people who were poor and homeless could come over and pick a little food for themselves. So Ruth finds a field, and takes a little for herself and Naomi. The field belongs to a man named Boaz, and he sees Ruth doing this, and learns about her story. He's so touched by Ruth's commitment to Naomi, that he goes above and beyond to give them as much food as they need. And then the love story starts, Ruth is moved by the generosity of Boaz, and Boaz by the amazing attitude Ruth has during such a difficult time. And then it turns out, Boaz is actually the perfect person to help Naomi and Ruth out of the situation they're in, and reclaim their old land in Bethlehem from before Elimelech and Naomi left. In the end, Boaz and Ruth get married, and they get their happily ever after ending.

Now you might be thinking, wait a second, Bethlehem, isn't that...? Yep, that's the town David was born in, the town Jesus was born in. In fact, Boaz and Ruth, are their ancestors, Boaz and Ruth are the great grandparents of king David. All because Ruth stayed committed to her family through the tragedy, and was willing to go all the way to a new land to support her struggling mother-in-law.

What does it mean to submit to one another in our families? What does it mean to honor our father and mother? It means we're willing to sacrifice for their benefit. We're willing to give up some of what we like, some of what we enjoy, for their sake. We'll all have our moments of arguing and disagreements, but there is tremendous reward for those who stick through it. So whatever situation you find your family in, look for ways to serve each other, and in the words of Boaz "May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."





Don't forget camp arev pictures

Start with prayer

Well, I'm happy to get a chance to share from God's word with you today. Sorry we don't have an Armenian message today, but unfortunately my Armenian isn't good enough yet to actually preach a sermon. Hopefully someday. Instead, I thought it would be nice to give everyone a window into what we've been covering in our junior high and high school group. In the youth group study series we've been doing, we've been going through different callings in the old testament, the theme is "Called by God," and today we're looking at Gideon. So, if you have your Bible with you, you can open to Judges chapter 6. And if you're at your computer, you can always pull it up online. This week we're focusing on getting rid of idols, and Gideon is such an appropriate story to look.

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To set the stage, the book of Judges takes place between the time the Israelites got into their land, but before the time of the kings began. After Moses and Joshua, but before guys like King Saul or King David. You can see here some of the surrounding nations at the time. A common theme throughout the book of Judges was a people who really didn't know what they were doing. There's this reoccurring line: and then everyone did what seemed right in their own eyes. Over and over again, and whenever that happened, things would start going downhill, and these other nations would start to invade. Gideon was living in such a time, when Israel was being oppressed in particular by the Midianites, and a few other armies as well. Let's take a look, starting with verses 1-10

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The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. <sup>2</sup> Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. <sup>3</sup> Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. <sup>4</sup> They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. <sup>5</sup> They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count them or their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. <sup>6</sup> Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.

Slide

<sup>7</sup> When the Israelites cried out to the LORD because of Midian, <sup>8</sup> he sent them a prophet, who said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. <sup>9</sup> I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors; I drove them out before you and gave you their land. <sup>10</sup> I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me."

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It's a time of desperation. A time of feeling helpless, facing impossible odds. Hiding from the danger, sheltering in place for 7 years. Maybe we can relate. They were facing enemies they couldn't possibly hope to defeat. Maybe it feels like that for us now. Up against a challenge that none of us really know how to deal with. We're confused, there's conflicting information, you don't know who to trust, you don't really know what the path to victory looks like. Feels like you're stuck in place, with nowhere to go forward. Sometimes we take stories like this to mean that every time disaster comes it's because God is punishing us. Things go wrong, and we start thinking, "oh, it's because I did something, now God is punishing me." Things start going bad enough, and then you have the folks who start quoting Revelation, right? It's the end times! Repent! Jesus is coming back!

Slide

And then we have to all start watching the Left Behind movies while we wait for Nicolas Cage or Kirk Cameron to save us, right? Is that what happens in those movies? I haven't actually watched any of them, so I don't know. They've made a bunch, right? You can tell it's a good Left Behind movie because there's fire and lightning in the background right? You can't have a good movie about the end times without fire and lightning in the background, I think that's one of the rules.

But joking aside, I think there is something important that happens in a disaster like this, when things start falling apart. I don't mean a disaster like a Nicolas Cage movie, I mean a disaster like what Gideon's living through, like what we're living through. We think we're living in a time of peace and security, and then:

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During a disaster, we find the things we used to trust in may not have been very reliable. The things we thought would keep us safe. The things we thought would be our tower of refuge. In the end, they didn't really have the power we thought. And in the midst of this, Gideon is called, verses 11 through 16:

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The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. <sup>12</sup> When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."

<sup>13</sup> "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian."

<sup>14</sup> The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

<sup>15</sup> "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

<sup>16</sup> The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive."

Gideon is chosen and called, but he has trouble accepting this message "The Lord is with you." I can't say I blame him. His family is desperate and starving. He's hiding his grain in a pit, in a winepress, so the enemy soldiers won't find it. He's not feeling hopeful, no one feels safe. He's not some great warrior. In fact, there's a bit of pain in Gideon's response to God. If you keep reading the story, later you find out Gideon's brothers had been killed during this time. He's lost people he's cared about. And now God has the nerve to come to him and say "God is with you?" Really God? Have you seen my situation? Have you seen what I've lost?

I love this response, because it's something we can all relate to, isn't it? The problem of suffering. How can God be good when everything seems to be going from bad to worse? God, if you're so good, if you're with me, why have I been out of work for so long. God, I've just lost my best friend, I've just lost my brother, I've just lost my...how can you tell me you love me. God, my child is sick, she's dying, how can you tell me you love me?

It's what we feel, isn't it? I think maybe we're sometime afraid of pouring out our heart to God like that, because we're afraid we'll get some kind of lecture of all the bad things we did and that we deserve it. Right? God's punishing me, I don't want to talk to him

now, and all these other conflicting thoughts and emotions. But notice, God doesn't give Gideon some big lecture. He doesn't walk Gideon through all the old testament laws he or his people have broken.

Slide

You see, the reality was God hadn't walked away from Israel, Israel had walked away from God. It's like if you walked away from solid ground to stand on thin ice. At some point, that ice is going to break and you're going to fall through, aren't you? But God doesn't actually answer Gideon's question, does he? He had actually answered it earlier, there had been a prophet who said why this was happening, but now isn't the time for that. Now is just the encouragement, that things were about to change for the better. There's a part of Gideon that wants to believe this, so he responds in faith, verses 17-24:

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Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. <sup>18</sup> Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you."

And the LORD said, "I will wait until you return."

<sup>19</sup> Gideon went inside, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah<sup>[a]</sup> of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak.

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<sup>20</sup> The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And Gideon did so. <sup>21</sup> Then the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread with the tip of the staff that was in his hand. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared. <sup>22</sup> When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Alas, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"

<sup>23</sup> But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."

<sup>24</sup> So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

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The Bible never actually says why Gideon decides to do this. I wonder sometimes what he was expecting. Sometimes we bring our offerings to the Lord and expect them to be used in a certain way. We set up an endowment fund or some special account for a project. We have an expectation. I don't know what Gideon's expectation was; all I know is his family was probably starving and he's bringing a lot of food to this messenger. I don't know how I'd feel bringing an offering that valuable to God in such a desperate situation only to watch it get burned up. Maybe that's the Armenian in me; I don't like to see food wasted.

But God accepted the offering, and now Gideon realizes that everything is about to change. He's ready, it's time to change the course of a nation. And so, God give Gideon his first assignment, verses 25-32

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That same night the LORD said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old.<sup>[b]</sup> Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole<sup>[c]</sup> beside it. <sup>26</sup> Then build a proper kind of<sup>[d]</sup> altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second<sup>[e]</sup> bull as a burnt offering."

<sup>27</sup> So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the LORD told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople, he did it at night rather than in the daytime.

<sup>28</sup> In the morning when the people of the town got up, there was Baal's altar, demolished, with the Asherah pole beside it cut down and the second bull sacrificed on the newly built altar!

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<sup>29</sup> They asked each other, "Who did this?"

When they carefully investigated, they were told, "Gideon son of Joash did it."

<sup>30</sup> The people of the town demanded of Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it."

<sup>31</sup> But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, "Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his

altar.” <sup>32</sup> So because Gideon broke down Baal’s altar, they gave him the name Jerub-Baal<sup>[f]</sup> that day, saying, “Let Baal contend with him.”

#### Slide

It’s interesting, Gideon’s first assignment isn’t to gather his soldiers, it isn’t to get weapons, he isn’t giving a big speech. Before Gideon can save the nation, he needs to get his worship right. So Gideon says to him, alright it’s time to get going, but first, there’s one thing you need to do. Those idols you have to other gods at your house? Time to get rid of them. They couldn’t save you before, and they can’t save you now. It’s time to start trusting in the right thing.

I think there’s an important lesson in there for each of us. God isn’t looking for the strongest. He isn’t looking for someone who is rich. Gideon didn’t have advanced college degrees, not even a deep theological education. He wasn’t the bravest, and he wasn’t a clever strategist. God doesn’t look for those things. The people God chooses to save the world are the people who are willing to leave their useless idols and follow God in faith. It can be a dangerous thing, though; people hate it when you stop worshipping their idols. Look at the response of his town. They’re ready to kill him. And notice, it’s not because he tore down their idols. He didn’t go around vandalizing other people’s property. They’re mad at him for tearing down his own idols. Why?

#### Slide

By pulling down those statues, Gideon showed they had no real power at all. And people, we get angry when our idols are questioned. We see so much anger around us today, don’t we? There’s a lot of hatred, because there’s honestly a lot of things people worship without realizing it. We think of statues being torn down here, and maybe we think of all the people angry when statues are put up or torn down around the US lately. All those civil war statues. A lot of people are furious about it today, they don’t even know who those people were. A statue comes down, “you’re destroying my history!” You don’t even know who that person was. Or the people who are furious when you don’t support their politician or their political party. The second amendment obsession; that the things that will save us are our guns. If I have a gun, then I’m safe.

Or this weird notion of tolerance. I remember back during the time of that prop 8 stuff back in 2008, on the gay marriage issue. The night of the election, I was walking back to the dorm at UCLA and as I was walking I passed by one of those “no on prop 8” groups, and they were asking everyone who walked by if they had voted no on it. The polls had already closed, so I was a little confused as to why they were there. As I was passing by,

they called out to me asking if I had voted no on it. I looked at them in a little confusion, and asked them if they knew the polls had already closed. That's all I said. Oh, they were angry, started shouting at me. One person shouted as I was walking away, I hope your sandwich is rotten! Which was a little strange, since I didn't actually have a sandwich, but...anyway, they were angry. I'll always remember the irony of so much hatred coming from people holding up signs talking about love.

The anger when you don't use the right slogan, right? Black lives matter, blue lives matter, all lives matter. Stances on social justice, nationalism and worship of country, the obsession of whether or not you believe in science. Why do people get angry? Because when you stop worshiping the things they worship, it sends a message. A message that says "Your idol can't save. I'm going to something else." And this anger, it's different than righteous, godly anger when we see evil. God does get angry at wickedness, when the weak and the innocent are abused or exploited, and we'll get angry at that too if our hearts are aligned with God's. But the anger when our idols are challenged, that's a self centered anger...when we feel our own self worth is being called into question.

If Gideon was going to change the course of a nation, he had to admit that the idols his family had been worshiping didn't have any real power. And I want each of us to think; has this crisis we're in now shown you any idols you're still worshipping? I don't mean tools you're using, I mean idols you're worshipping; there's a difference. Tools are great to use. I'm a science and engineering background, I use science all the time as a tool to accomplish things. But science is a process to determine truth, it isn't the truth itself. Someone can say "I believe the scientists" "I believe in science" but what do you do when two researchers disagree with each other, and both have plenty of evidence to support their positions? It happens all the time. To say you believe a scientist without actually understanding the evidence for their claim is actually the opposite of the spirit of scientific investigation.

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We can recognize that something has stopped being a tool and started becoming an idol when we fall into despair when it doesn't work the way we wanted. That's how you can tell when it's become an idol for you. When you're angry when others aren't valuing it as much as you do. When you believe it's the only possible way forward. And ultimately, you'll find the idols in your life will start clashing with God. That's just how idols work, when they stop becoming tools. Tools can be powerful, but only in the right hands. A power saw is a great tool to cut wood, but not in the hands of a 4 yr old. For



tools, we recognize there's a time and a place. An idol, on the other hand, that just takes over, it consumes you, and before long you feel like you can't live without it.

And as Christians, let's be honest, the battles we fight and the tools we use are just, they're different than the rest of the world. We don't fight the way they fight, and we don't fight for the things they fight for.

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Consider Ephesians 6:12-13

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. <sup>13</sup> Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Or 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. <sup>4</sup> The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. <sup>5</sup> We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Slides

For the Christian, the battle is spiritual warfare, not religious warfare. There's a difference. Religious warfare is about power. It's about control, getting people to follow certain rituals and actions. Spiritual warfare is about the heart. We're fighting against ideas, we're defeating arguments. We're battling against hatred, and bringing people into peace with God. Religious warfare uses the tools of this world, tools invented by man. Spiritual warfare uses prayer, and fasting, and a reliance on God's power above all things. How many times, how many battles throughout the Bible does God say, "The Lord will fight for you, you need only be still." We persevere in faith, in hope, and in love, because we know the ultimate battle is in God's hands.

I see so many people in the body of Christ around the world today who have stopped relying on the power of God, and they've started obsessing over the tools of man. We think that lawyers, and court cases, and lawsuits will be what we need to win the battle. If we just get the right person elected to office, that will do it. If we just get the right

person on the supreme court, that will solve everything. If we can just win our court case, then we'll...but I think in our hearts we all know...that isn't the way to win, is it?

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Another thing I've seen promoted is this idea that there are 7 mountains, 7 pillars of cultural influence. I think the idea came somewhere out of the themes in Revelation, and there's this idea that Christians are supposed to go out and conquer these 7 mountains in order to win the war, or something. These 7 things, religion, family, education, government, media, entertainment and the arts, and business. Those are apparently the things you're supposed to take over to advance in the world. I feel like if an Armenian had made this list, food probably would have been added somewhere in the mix, maybe like an 8<sup>th</sup> mountain or something. The mountain of peloff or kebab, I think, it would...or maybe it would replace a category? Do you really need control of the government when you have seu bureg? I just...

Look, joking aside, sure, these are things to pray about. We want our families to be strong. We'd like it if there were godly, righteous leaders making wise decisions. But let's be honest, throughout almost all of human history God has been working his plan in spite of those things, not because of those things. The power of Christ is greater than all these things put together, because his is truly the power to change us from the inside out. If you can share the gospel with an important government official, sure do it. If you can share it with some business leader, some media executive, sure share the gospel with everyone you can. The message that Jesus died for our sins so that we might have eternal life is a message for everyone to hear.

But also, share that message with the weak and the powerless. Share it with those society has cast aside. Jesus did not spend the majority of his time with the wealthy and the influential...he spent it with fishermen, with nobodies, with people the world looked at and said, "this person will never amount to anything." How many of you can actually name the major Roman officials that lived during Jesus' time? The ones who aren't named in the Bible, ok? But really, you probably don't know many of their names...but you know the names of 12 nobodies, you've read the words over and over again of 12 nobodies, people whose faith and words echo on to this day 2000 years later. That's power you can't beat. That's what happens when you stop trusting in the idols of this world, and put your faith wholly in God.

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Think of the things we've been putting our trust in up to this point, the tools that maybe have become idols. The things that get credit when we do well. Maybe it's something external, or maybe it's something internal. I remember, during one of the hard times of doing my PhD, it really looked like I wasn't going to make it. Things kept going wrong, kept having setbacks, and so many people were telling me that I wouldn't be able to succeed in finishing my PhD if God stayed the number 1 thing in my life. And I was constantly asking myself, almost every day, what if I fail? What if I have to drop out, because it doesn't work out. What happens if everything I set out to work on just falls apart, and the only thing I would be able to say after it was all said and done was I stayed faithful to the calling of God. I really thought about the question, when it's all said and done, if I walk away looking like a failure, but God is glorified, am I ok with that? That people would look at my life and say, man that guy, he can't do anything right, he sure is lucky his God saved him.

Don't get me wrong, I believe God does lead us, from victory to victory, he does bring us vindication, but our victories don't always look like the victories the world around us celebrates. A whole crowd of people ready to kill Gideon because he tore down a statue sure doesn't look like a victory in the moment, does it? But later, when it came time for the battle, for the victory, there was no mistaking who won the battle. God ends up sending Gideon into battle with 300 soldiers against an army of 120000. They didn't even go into battle with weapons. They went over at night, in the dark, with trumpets and jars and torches. I remember there was one documentary that was trying to teach about stories in the Bible, and they had one guy saying "This was the first example in history of a group of commandos doing a special operation" or something like that.

Let's be clear, these 300 guys were not, like, spartan 300 guys. These were not mighty warriors, they were nobodies. And together, in the middle of the night, they just all blew on their trumpets and made a racket. Broke the jars. Got the entire camp of midianite soldiers awake, and in the dark, in the confusion, these half awake soldier start looking around for the enemy, and they just see people in the dark, so they start fighting each other. So in one night of confusion, the entire army defeats itself, and runs away. This was not some great plan or strategy. Gideon showed up that day with over 30 thousand of his own soldiers, hoping to win the fight. And he was terrified. This was not his plan. But God wanted this, so that everyone would understand that it was God who was winning the battle, and nothing else.

What's going to get credit when you get your victory? Will people say, oh, it's because he has all that wealth.

Slide

I think of Proverbs 18:11 – The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall to high to scale.

Slide, but then there's Proverbs 11:4 – Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death

And then, Proverbs 18:10 - The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.

What will get the credit? Oh she was smart, that's why. He was good looking. She had political connections. If only I get into that college, then my life will be set. In order for my kids to succeed, they need to take all the advanced classes, they need to do all the right extracurricular activities...we don't have time for church, or Bible studies, or prayer. If I get that promotion, that's really what I need. Maybe those things can be good tools, but if those are the things that get credit when you succeed, if those are the things you think you can't do without? Maybe they've crossed the line a little. What's the tower you run to when everything seems to fall apart?

And let's be honest, our trust needs to be in Christ and Christ alone, doesn't it? I think there's a lot of people that go through life thinking they can have one foot in and one foot out. They can have one foot on solid ground, and one foot on the thin ice. Half the house built on a solid foundation, and half the house built on sand. Spend half the time keeping your guard up against a dangerous animal, and the other half of the time you drop your guard. But it doesn't work, does it? When that ice gives way, it doesn't matter that you have one foot on solid ground, you'll fall in the water just the same. When the earthquake hits, it doesn't matter that half the house is on a solid foundation. Anyone remember the good old 89 earthquake? Doesn't matter if you keep your guard up half the time around a dangerous animal, when you drop your guard, it's still going to bite you.

The challenge of the Christian walk is to always be examining ourselves, looking out for our own idols that have taken hold. It's the process of removing the idols in our lives. We won't be perfect, we'll make mistakes along the way. A disaster will come, something will go wrong, and we'll realize, oh, maybe that thing wasn't as powerful as I thought. Maybe I shouldn't have put so much trust in that thing. Or maybe the thing I was working for really wasn't that important. And let's not forget, all the things of this world are temporary, aren't they? We leave it all behind when we die, don't we? If

nothing else, it'll all get wiped out when the sun explodes in a few billion years anyway. Right?

Slide

I remember seeing the advertisements for the cryopreservation of people a while back. People so desperate to escape death, they'll pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to freeze themselves in the hopes that one day they can be made immortal. It's ironic...it's sad but it's also ironic, people are willing to spend everything they have if they think it will let them live forever, but the reality is eternal life is something only God can give, and he gives it to us for free. Jesus paid the price already, in full.

Slide

I think one of the reasons people have gotten so angry during this pandemic is because it's forced them to face their own mortality in a way they're not used to. The reality is people die every day, from a lot of conditions other than COVID. Heart disease, 650 thousand deaths per year. Cancer, 600 thousand. Accidents, 170 thousand, chronic respiratory diseases, 160 thousand per year. Abortion...1 million per year in the US, roughly? You know, it's interesting, during Gideon's time, some of the other religions, Molech in particular, involved sacrificing your own child, killing your own baby, so the god would bless you and reward you. So you would prosper. Maybe things really haven't changed much in all these thousands of years, have they?

The point is the death rate hasn't changed since the dawn of time, it's still one death per person. We'll all face it, we can't escape it, and when that happens, what will you be putting your hope in? One of the challenges we would give to each other in one of the Christian ministries at UCLA was this question: If you died and came before God, and He asked you to give one reason why He should let you into heaven, what would you say? Would you start listing off your good works? Would you say, "Hey, at least I didn't kill anyone." It's funny how almost everyone has this notion we have to be good enough to get into heaven, but they always draw that line in the perfect spot so they can feel like they're good enough without really having to change anything. But we look at what Jesus teaches, the standard of righteousness he sets, Be holy, be perfect, because God is perfect, and we have to be honest with ourselves that we have not met the standard God has set.

I don't know who's watching this sermon today, I don't know how much you know about Jesus, or Christianity. I think there are a lot of wrong ideas floating around about what the Bible actually teaches. The message of the cross is very simple; Jesus died on

the cross to pay the price we couldn't pay. He lived the perfect, sinless life we couldn't live, and paid the price for us sinners. The message is not; you need to live a perfect life and follow all the rules. It's not, ok once you're baptized and say the sinner's prayer and follow this ritual then you go to heaven. It's about being honest with ourselves, we know in our hearts we've fallen short of what God has created us for. We broke our relationship with our creator, and now someone needs to fix it. That's what Jesus does. He makes that broken relationship whole again, for all who are willing to just trust him and not our own accomplishments and successes. That's ultimately what needs to change. We'll go through disasters in life like this, sure, and God will bring us through. Gideon, man, 7 years they're hiding, sheltering in place. We won't be doing this for nearly as long.

Or, I don't know, what if we are. What if this goes on another 7 years? What if, for the next 7 years, we wake up every day not knowing when it will end, not knowing what we should do, and the only certainty we have is God's promise that he'll see us through to eternal life? Because no matter what, this is temporary. How it ends, who knows, but it will end. This life I'm living will one day end. And on that day, when I stand before God with nothing else to lean on, no righteousness of my own, no accomplishment that could earn God's favor, that day when all I can say is have mercy on me God, a sinner just like everyone else, all I have on that day is the promise from Jesus, that my sins will be wiped away and remembered no more. And that's the promise to each of us, young and old, near and far, the wise and the foolish. Come and repair that broken relationship with God, come and have fellowship with him again, set your guilt and fear aside and enjoy the life God has created for you. If that's you today, if you don't have that and it's something you want, I encourage you, reach out to us. Email, phone calls, facebook, whatever, if you realize you've been trusting in things that couldn't save you and you're looking for the things that can, come talk with us, one sinner to another. And for those of you who are already followers of Jesus, and you're wondering what you should be doing during this time: pray and ask God to reveal to you any idols that have taken hold of your life. God is faithful, if we ask Him to work in our hearts, we receive. Ask for courage to tear down those useless idols, and the strength to put your hope in Christ alone. Not one foot in and one foot out; but completely, totally standing on the solid ground. Because he is worth it, and he'll see us through. Let's pray.

Well, it's been a while since I've been up here. Last couple of months have been pretty exciting since the wedding; a lot of joy, a lot of great memories, a lot of celebration. But it's also been really difficult. Both Lara and I have been in a lot of pain. We're getting tired a lot, chemo has been knocking me down a bit hard each time, there's been a lot of challenges. I think those kinds of stories go along well with the lives of prophets like Elijah and Elisha. A lot of great moments, but also a lot of challenges. A lot of setbacks. A lot of things not going the way you want.

**Elisha has taken over for Elijah at this point.** Elijah has been taken up to heaven, a pretty epic scene, and now it's Elisha's turn to step up to bat. And the situation has changed quite a bit. Ahab is out of the picture. He refused to listen to the warnings of the prophet Michaiah, and gets himself killed in a battle against Aram. Jezebel is still around, but her influence is starting to weaken. Her sons are stepping up, first Ahaziah, then Joram when Ahaziah has his little fall that we remember from a few weeks ago, but by the time Joram comes around he's starting to wise up and realize that he probably doesn't want to make the same mistakes as his dad and brother...he doesn't want to mess with this Elisha guy. He's not turning to God or anything, but he at least realizes that going on an active campaign to kill the prophets of God is probably not the best use of his resources. And especially after a major battle when he, Jehoshaphat, and the king of Edom need to be rescued by Elisha, he's going to leave Elisha be for now.

**Elisha, meanwhile, is doing a lot of miraculous stuff.** Up to this point, we've seen him part the Jordan river, purify the water around Jericho, summon some bears to attack a gang that was threatening him, rescue the kings and their armies when they go up against Moab in that battle, and even miraculously multiply some oil to help a widow pay off a debt. A lot of parallels with Elijah's miracles, so it's pretty clear that he has that double portion of Elijah's spirit, and has the added bonus that no one is actively trying to hunt him down and kill him. That's always a nice change of pace, isn't it?

**Now here we find another parallel with Elijah;** Elisha finds himself welcomed by an elderly couple in Shunem. Whenever he's passing by there, the couple insists that he stays with them. They even build a whole room on their roof for him. So, a little different than Elijah, who stays with a poor starving widow and her son during the drought, but still, we have a prophet of God staying with a particular family whenever he's in town. After enough visits, Elisha decides that he needs to do something for this couple to repay them for their kindness. When he finds out that they don't have a son, well, he decides that's the gift they're going to receive. So he calls the wife over and tells her that within the next year, she's going to have a son.

**Now, this is an elderly couple,** so you can imagine her reaction. It was probably a point of pain that they didn't have a son at this point. We're not given any information on whether they had any daughters, or maybe if they had sons at some point but they all died, but either way she has a very human reaction here: Man of God, please don't get my hopes up. Not now, not with things the way they are.

Hope can be a very frightening thing, can't it. On one hand, we need it to live; hope is what gives us strength from day to day. It's what gets us out of the bed in the morning thinking, something good might happen today. But when our hope turns out to be false, when we're let down, man that can just kill us, can't it? We're hoping for that job promotion, then it goes to someone else. Hoping we'll get into that university, then it doesn't happen. Hoping the warriors will win their tournament, and then...ok maybe that one isn't that important...or it shouldn't be. I've seen some people that get a little too caught up in their sports...and...well, we won't go there today.

I'll tell you though, some of the toughest let downs I've had in the last year are when I've found out that I didn't qualify for one of the experimental treatments I was hoping to get. Boy those were tough. All this hope building up, and then, nothing. That's why it's really important that the core of our hope, the foundation, can't be on earthly things. Earthly things, they let you down. They're temporary. You focus your hope on them long enough, they keep letting you down enough, and you just stop hoping. Your heart is so hurt, you just give up. What's the point?

And that's why I think Elisha is doing something more here than just giving this couple a kid. He's showing them that there is a foundation of hope beyond what they've settled for. There's something greater at work in our lives. God is not some distant God who is only interested in the activities of kings and armies, he's a present God who takes an active role in our lives. The events in their lives may have left them with disappointment, growing old without having a son to pass on their legacy to, but that's not what God wants us to focus on. He wants us to fix our eyes on him first, and he'll work out the details.

You know, it's funny, over the last year and a half, one of the discussions Lara and I have been having quite often, is on **Psalm 37:4** – Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart. Tough verse for people who have been going through the health issues that we've been going through, isn't it? Is it true, does he give us the desires of our hearts. Is this just about eternal things; heaven and spiritual blessings and such, does it include earthly desires, the desire for healing, the desire for marriage, for children? Because let's be honest, no matter how much we worship God, no matter how close we are to God, we don't get every single thing we want in this life. Even the prophets like Elijah and Elisha, they didn't get everything they wanted. They had some let downs.

But it's also true that as we mature in our faith, the desires of our hearts change. They start aligning bit by bit more with God's will, and God's plan. The point of that verse, that idea, is not to get God's plan to conform to our desires, but to get our desires to conform to the plans of God. And nothing does that like a season of testing. The testing of this couple, going through life without having the son they desired, led them to this moment, honoring God by providing for his prophet. And now, as their hearts are aligning with God, he's giving them a new hope, a son.



Now, you would think that after everything this couple has been through, that would be the end of the story, the happily ever after. We went through life with all this disappointment, we fixed our eyes on God, and now God has turned our testing into a testimony. Done, right? Yet look at verses 18-28.

As tough as it is going through life without a son, to finally get that son, only to lose him right after; that has to be an even greater disappointment than anything. Her response to this is such a human response: Why did you get my hopes up? I didn't ask for this, I didn't want this. This is why I didn't want to get my hopes up...because the pain of the loss would just be too great.

But notice also, when the tragedy comes, she knows exactly where to go. She goes straight to God. And we need to learn from that; when the tragedy comes, when the testing and the trials seem too great, God is the one we run to first. All the hardships she went through in life, those gave her the foundation to know who to run to in times of trouble. And of course, Elisha responds:

#### Verse 29-37

A little déjà vu here, right? Reminds us of the time Elijah raised the widow's son back to life. Again here we see the power of Elijah at work in Elisha, and God is glorified through this miracle. But we might also be left to wonder...why? Why bring this couple through such a rollercoaster? If you're going to give them a son, give them a son? Why make them go so long without a son, just to give them a son when they had given up hope, then take him away, then give him back? At least with Elijah and the widow, the miracle brought her to the faith, realize the God of Elijah is the one true God, but this couple here already seemed to have that foundational faith. They knew who the one true God was.

And we can often find ourselves in those situations, asking why. Why did I have to go through that trial, why did I have to have that hardship. Why did I have to go through cancer twice, right? Asking why is a perfectly normal question to ask, and there's nothing wrong with asking God why. This is something that Lara and I have talked about a lot, as we ask why we're going through the difficult trials we're going through. We're not always given the answer, but there's nothing wrong with asking the question.

However, in the story with this couple, we're given a little insight into the why question, because their journey isn't over. Fast forward a little while. Elisha has been going on some adventures, healing a commander from Aram, gets their attention and the army goes after him, he beats their armies a couple of times, saves a city, few other miracles, and then in chapter 8, this couple is back on the scene. Look at verses 1 through 6.

Now how's that for God's timing, huh? The husband has probably died at this point, so the wife was forced to flee the country during the time of famine. She returns hoping to get her old land back, and just happens to walk in right as the king is listening to a story about her. And now her story and her miracles have not only set her up to get her home back, they've become a tool to

show the king of Israel that God really is at work. Keep in mind, the northern kingdom of Israel was usually the nation that was turning away from God to idol worship, so to have the King actually interested in the miracles of Elisha, rather than trying to find a chance to kill him, is a pretty significant change in direction. All of the testing this woman has been through has not only set her up for success, but it also becomes a testimony to the king. Now the whole country has been affected by her life, and we see God's plan all coming together. Her faithfulness has been rewarded, and has become a blessing to many.

One of the things Lara and I have talked about during our difficulties, is that we don't always see the plan coming together. We don't always see the purpose of everything. Sometimes we do, and it's great, but other times we just have faith that God is doing something behind the scenes that we don't see. And it's stories like this that can give us encouragement that there is always a purpose behind what God is leading us through. One of my favorite verses, **Romans 8:28**

**"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."**

This verse doesn't mean that only good things happen to us, it means that God uses all the things we go through, both the good and the bad, for the ultimate good of His people. And our ultimate good, at the end of the day, isn't the things of this world, it's the eternal things, the stuff that we don't yet fully see. The Apostle Paul writes, in **1 Corinthians 13:12** – "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." For now, we don't know the whole story, we don't understand everything. But then, in heaven, when the temporary things pass away, we know fully.

I think a lot of you have heard the leader of the team I go to Haiti with, Winston, yeah? He loves sayings that are playing on words, and one of his favorites is God is going to **turn your test** into a testimony. I think another one is He's going to turn your mess into a message. It's a fun play on words, but it's the truth. That's what Romans 8:28 speaks to. And we need to realize that our testimony is important. Telling others the things that God has done in our lives; the difficulties he has brought us through. I think all too often, especially in Armenian circles, there's so much pride, that we don't want to admit the times when we're not doing too great. When things were rough, and we needed God. When God brought us through a difficult season and showed his power. Those stories are important, because it shows other people that God is actively working today. It strengthens and builds the faith of the church body. We may not be sharing our testimony before kings, but hey, you never know. Right?

**Revelation 12:10-11**

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”

The blood of the lamb, and the word of their testimony. Our testimony is not just influencing the lives of people around us, but it's also a key part of us overcoming the enemy. The accuser. So my challenge to everyone today is to know your testimony. Know what God has brought you through. Trust that God is working a purpose that maybe you don't see yet, but you will at some time. And as God gives you the desires of your heart, as your heart aligns to God's will, give God glory. Because these light and momentary struggles are nothing compared to the glory that is to come.

## Trials of the King

Many of us are familiar with the classic story of the Lion King. Young Simba grows up aspiring to one day become king and rule over the land, but has a rather selfish attitude about it. He wants the admiration that the king has, but not the responsibility. That all changes the day his father is killed; resulting in him running away from his home out of guilt and shame. He abandons all desire to become king, allowing his uncle Scar to take the throne and bring the land to ruin. Scar has the same problem Simba had; a desire for power and admiration, but no interest in the responsibilities that go with it.

The temptation to seek power and admiration is something we all face, and part of living the righteous life that we couldn't meant that Jesus had to face these same temptations. We saw this Sunday that Satan comes to tempt Jesus in the wilderness; pointing out that Jesus could abuse his power for selfish reasons and rule over the entire earth as king. He could take whatever he wanted; why concern himself with responsibilities and obligations?

But we see in each temptation that Jesus responds with scripture; a demonstration that the power of God's word allows us to resist even the greatest of temptations. And make no mistake; the extent to which Jesus was tempted was even greater than anything we will face; because his actual divine power is greater than any power we could possibly possess. We may see people on this earth with the wealth to buy anything they could possibly want, or the military strength to conquer nations and take the spoils, but Jesus can command the very laws of nature themselves. He can miraculously multiply food, he can stop a violent storm with a word, even raise the dead. Just imagine the kind of temptations you would have if you had that kind of power.

Yet we do all go through temptations, and as we resist them we find ourselves being more equipped to carry out the work God has for us. And like it did for Jesus, the Bible gives us the tools to resist these temptations. Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verses 13 and 14

"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry."

Often this passage is misused to say that God will never give us more than what we can handle; but that's not really accurate. We face things all the time that we can't handle on our own strength, and that's when we rely the most on God's power. God's power is what gives us a way out; either through bible verses that equip us with wisdom or even unique opportunities God opens up in our lives. God doesn't want us to fall into temptation, and always calls us to look to him for deliver us. As we pray in the lord's prayer: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. People who are convinced they can do everything with their own strength are typically the people that have the worst falls, because their pride sets them up for failure.

And that's exactly what we see in the story of the Lion King. In the end, it's Scar's pride that leads to his downfall, while Simba grows out of his arrogance during his time of exile, and instead learns to use his strength for the sake of others, eventually taking up his obligation to rule as a just king. We as Christians need to recognize that we ultimately serve a just king, one who has faced all our same temptations, yet never once used his power for selfish or arrogant purposes. Instead, he exercised his power for our

sake, and through that bought salvation for all of us. So let's give our king honor, and stand up to temptation just as he did.

## The True Shepherd

Times were difficult in Israel. The country was heading in the wrong direction. The Israelites were looking for change. They were tired of the Roman government continuing to exert control over the region, tired of their high taxes being paid to a government that didn't represent them, and tired of their hopelessly divided leadership. People were putting their trust into all kinds of different things; money, violence, politics, rituals, laws...everything they were taught would save them from the things they hated. It was a time of would-be messiahs; men coming who gathered armies around them to fight against the Roman Empire, leading many to their deaths as they were quickly killed and their armies crushed. The Sadducees tried to make political alliances, the Zealots engaged in violence and terrorism, and the Pharisees tried to obey every ritual they could come up with to try to usher in the coming of the Christ.

Along came Jesus. Many people in leadership didn't know what to make of him. Some saw Jesus as a threat to their power. Some saw him as insane, or demon possessed. Some listened to him in amazement, others with disdain. Throughout all of this, he continued to gain followers, and continued to preach about the Kingdom of God. During a time when people were putting their trust in all kinds of different things, Jesus was exposing the uselessness of all of it. Money can be squandered or stolen. Metal weapons and shields can rust and break. Leaders will abandon you for their own gain. And as Jesus was continuing to be challenged by the religious leadership after he had healed a blind man, he gave this response, recorded in John 10:7-18

Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

There are many people who take great pride in pretending they aren't "sheep" that follow others blindly. They are convinced that they can rely only on their own common sense; that they are immune to the persuasions of others. The reality, however, is that we all put our trust in something. We all take some source as our authority for truth or direction; we all have some idol we look up to as our default. In the same way many Israelites followed these other would-be messiahs to their doom, I see people every day putting their trust in things that fall out right from under them.

One of the most important things we can do for ourselves is truly think and examine our lives to see what we're putting our trust in. What causes you to rejoice? What causes you to despair? What inspires your hope, and what causes you to lose hope? You see, losing hope doesn't mean it's time to give up on life. Contrary to what American society teaches, it can actually be a good thing if you've found that you've completely lost hope; losing hope happens when you realize that the thing you were putting your hope in up to this point wasn't something you could rely on. Only upon that realization can you switch, and truly put your trust in something that won't fail. In that sense, hopelessness doesn't have to be the end, but rather the opportunity for transition to something greater and more secure. Too many people treat hopelessness as a point you can never recover from...the moment to give up. The reality is our lives will find many moments when the things we were counting on prove unreliable; it is a learning process day by day to find out what we can trust in the future.

Jesus taught in this message that the reason he could be trusted as a shepherd was because of his sacrifice. He wasn't just showing up and bossing people around. He was dying to earn us a treasure and home that could never be taken away. He was building a place for us in a kingdom that would never fall. He wasn't giving empty talking points or campaign promises; he was providing one sacrifice for all. I think here in America in particular we've lost that understanding. This last election, more than anything, has shown just how misplaced our faith is. Is your faith in people, or in God? Was your faith in politicians and political parties? If you feel like you've lost hope, it's possible you have come to an important realization: you might have been putting your hope in something that never had the power to save you. On the other hand, if you want to rejoice that America has selected a president who embodies every evil that is celebrated in this country (pride, greed, sexual immorality, deceit, hatred, violence, etc...) watch out, because you're putting your hope in another self-proclaimed messiah who will lead you to the same destruction that all the messiahs in Jesus' time led their followers to. If you rejoice at the pain and frustration of others...the despair, the hatred, the suffering; watch out, because you've already set foot on that path to destruction, and you will reap what you sow.

Galatians 6:7-10 "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

What shepherd are you following? Where do you go for truth? Where do you go for hope? Where do you go to determine what is right or wrong? A politician? A pundit on TV? Some random internet click-bait article that got a million likes? Someone who will abandon the flock they're guarding the moment it is attacked? A thief who is only looking for what they can profit from you? Someone who will flip on a dime the moment the situation changes? How are things going with that? Have you been filled with hope? Anger? Sorrow? Arrogance? Peace?

As Jesus finished talking about being the one true shepherd, people in the crowd had two different reactions:

John 10:19-21

At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

Jesus was either insane when he spoke these words or he spoke the truth. He either came back to life after he was crucified, or he remains dead and buried in some unmarked tomb somewhere. He is either watching over us in love in this very moment from a throne in heaven, or his followers were teaching nothing but lies, delusions, and empty promises that will never be filled.

Many people did end up putting their trust in Jesus after his death, but many continued in their own ways. Ultimately, for those who continued their own ways, their path took them exactly where Jesus warned them it would; within one generation, the Jewish temple was destroyed and the people scattered. All the things they were putting their trust in, all their leaders and shepherds, they all proved useless. In the blink of an eye, it was all gone. Meanwhile, the Christian church endured. They continued to grow in spite of terrible persecution. The hope Jesus promised continued to endure...continued to grow...and it continues to this day.

In these times of conflict and uncertainty, don't fall into the trap of relying on the same things that have created these problems in the first place. We live in a world where people fight over money and power and every other thing that can't last. It only leads to more anger and more hatred. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that only three things remain eternal: faith, hope, and love. The lives that you touch, the people you help, relationships you build...those are the things really worth living for. The power of forgiveness and the power of new life, this is the path Jesus has called us to, and the path he leads us down. Your goal shouldn't be to lead people down the path of pride and conflict; rather, lead people down the path of love and forgiveness that God gives. We have only one faithful shepherd; accept no substitutes.



We're taking a little break from Proverbs for two weeks, and this week we're talking about true worship. It reminds me of an interaction Jesus had with a Samaritan woman early on in his ministry. Samaria was a nation right next to Israel, made up of people that were kind of half Jewish, but really didn't like Jewish people, and the Jewish people didn't like them. Yet here Jesus is in this Samaritan town, and as he's talking with this woman she realizes that she isn't talking to any ordinary man. The Jesus guy was special, so she asks him an interesting question in John chapter 4, verses 19 and 20.

**19** The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. **20** Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."

She wants to know, where are we supposed to go to worship God? What is proper worship supposed to look like? During the times of King David and King Solomon, Jerusalem became the center of worship for the Jewish people, but the Samaritans would never want to go there. They wanted to worship God in their own way. But take a look how Jesus responds:

**21** Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. **22** You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. **23** But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. **24** God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus challenges the entire assumption of the question; there is no longer going to be a set place for worship. Instead, the important thing is to be worshipping God in our hearts and minds wherever we are, whatever we're doing. No longer will worship be about going to the right location on the right holiday to perform a particular ritual, we're now worshipping God with our lives.

Now, there are important parts of worship. As Christians we come together every Sunday, to celebrate the day Jesus rose from the dead. We join each other in song and in prayer, to encourage each other, pray for each other, and share the good things God has done for us. But you know, the early church in the book of Acts met pretty much every day. They didn't need to wait for Sundays to gather together, and we might do that too, joining each other during the week for prayer times and Bible studies. Or maybe just getting together to spend time with each other.

A lot of people miss this, though. They make worship all about following rituals, you need to do everything in the right order, sing the right song at a specific time, go through some specific motion in the right way, wear the right clothes, and while those can be good things, we need to remember that ultimately an outer appearance isn't what God is looking for. He isn't looking for the best dressed person, or the person who's pretending they have their whole life together and don't have any problems. He wants people who are singing praises honestly, even during the difficult times of sickness and loss. He wants people who are praying, not to put on a show,

but because they know God provides. He wants people listening to sermons and reading their Bibles because they know God's words are powerful and can transform us from the inside out. And it's when we worship in spirit and truth, even when it takes sacrifice, that God really does His most powerful work in us. When we worship God in the right way, we're the ones who walk away changed.

So don't miss out on the blessing worship is for each of us. Don't let yourself get misled by people who value rituals and outer appearance over the inner heart, and don't settle for a life where you only show up to worship at church once in a while when it's convenient for you. We gather each Sunday to honor God for the sacrifice He made so we can be forgiven and restored, and such a sacrifice is worthy of a lot more of our time each week than just an hour or two. So join us as we seek after everything God has to offer us. Let's worship with our whole lives.

## When Suffering Brings Salvation

At the end of the book of Genesis, as Joseph's brothers approach him worried he will hold a grudge for their mistreatment of him in the past, Joseph responds:

"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

A story of tragedy and conflict turning into triumph and reconciliation. A powerful reminder to each of us that God can use even the most hopeless situations to bring salvation to many. And at the end of the day, that's what it's all about. The pain and hardships and uncertainties we all face, those aren't the end. We're looking forward to a future promise, a greater purpose worked out by God.

As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:18 - I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

And again in 8:28 - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

And Paul, he was no stranger to suffering. Look at the list he gives us in 2 Corinthians chapter 11: imprisonments, countless beatings, almost killed, shipwrecked three times, even spending a day adrift at sea. Nights without sleep, days without food or water. Even sickness. Like I shared in my email last week, Paul makes an interesting comment in his letter to the Galatians; he reminds them that the reason he went to Galatia in the first place was because of some illness that he had. We don't know the full story about it, but it sounds like it had something to do with his eyes; maybe it was some kind of eye pain or maybe he was even losing his vision. Whatever it was, it sounds like it was something rather unpleasant. But, we know Paul was a guy who was doing miracles all over the place, why can't he heal this illness he has? Yet sometime later we see him write in 2 Corinthians 12:

In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I sometimes wonder if this thorn Paul talks about here is the same illness he talks about to the Galatians. Suffering that he really didn't want in life, he asked God several times to take it away, but in the end accepted that it was part of God's plan. And you know what, it's ok for us to do the same thing. It's ok to ask God to take our suffering away, and it's ok to be sad or confused when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we were hoping. Paul had those kinds of moments, and I'm sure Joseph did too in those years he spend as a slave and in prison. Even Jesus prayed three times for his suffering to be taken away from him the night before he was crucified.

But even during those times, we can take comfort in knowing that God hasn't forgotten us. We might not always see the purpose behind our suffering the way Paul and Joseph did, but faith allows us to press forward through the pain. And Paul gives us an interesting take on his suffering in

Colossians 1:24 - Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

This seems strange at first. We know Jesus' afflictions, the pain he endured on the cross, bought our complete and total salvation. The work is done, there's nothing more we need to do to earn salvation, so why does Paul say he needs to fill up something that was lacking in regard to Jesus' afflictions? It's because he understands that part of partnering with God in the advancing of the gospel is also suffering along with Jesus. Jesus may have paid the price for our salvation, but He's given us the message to carry out to the world. There may be suffering as we toil alongside God, but there's also great joy, as we see lives saved and transformed. The suffering that brought Paul to Galatia, the suffering that brought Joseph to Egypt, was matched by the great joy of seeing many lives saved.

I know we were all disappointed last week when we found out my diagnosis of cancer. A lot of people saying it doesn't feel fair, why do I have to have cancer again when I've already had it before. And I know this season is going to be one with a lot of pain and a lot of hardships. But it can also be one with joy and peace. It can also be one with hope, and love. I don't know what God is going to be doing during this time, but I do know that as we seek him he will fill us with a greater portion of his spirit, and empower us to do more things than we ever thought we could. And we'll be there for each other too, and we'll help each other through this time. And in the meantime, it's ok to be angry or upset or confused. It's ok to cry out to God and ask why, believe me, he gets that question a lot. But as we wrap up our series on Joseph, I want to leave us with some encouraging verses that Shant and Lori shared with me this week:

1 Corinthians 16:3 - Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.

Psalms 138:12 - Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD.

Isaiah 41:10 - So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Deuteronomy 31:6 - Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

Even if things are difficult, I hope you all have a week filled with joy and peace. And as always, if you ever need anything, I'm still just one phone call away.



## Who is the Greatest?

We just finished up a great Vacation Bible Camp week at church a little over a week ago. Had a really good time teaching some Bible lessons, playing some games, and building some fun things with the kids. Probably the most memorable moment was Thursday, after we had finished the lesson on Jesus' death and resurrection. I was talking about how central Jesus' death was to everything, and how trusting in Him is what makes us Christians, when one of the kids speaks up.

"My teacher at my Catholic school said that Catholics are the better Christians."

I smiled, and chuckled a little. Somewhat amused, but also somewhat disappointed, that at this Catholic school, that should be teaching the Bible, there is such a drastic misunderstanding of the true teachings of Jesus. Of course I had to respond to this claim, so I went straight to the first story in the Bible that came to mind. An interaction between Jesus and his disciples on this very question...who is the greatest?

To set the stage here in the gospel of Mark, chapter 9, a lot of crazy things have been happening. Jesus had just taken Peter, John, and James up on a mountain, and they had a bewildering moment when they saw Jesus completely transfigured, and speaking with Moses and Elijah. They don't even know how to process this event, and Jesus tells them to keep it to themselves. They come down from the mountain to find a crowd, with the other disciples arguing with some of the scholars, and a father desperately trying to get a demon exorcised out of his son. Jesus heals the boy, criticizes his disciples for having such little faith, and takes them away privately to start explaining that he would soon be betrayed and killed.

To put it mildly, the disciples are frustrated. They couldn't heal this boy, and were no doubt embarrassed about it. Jesus is talking about dying, and they don't understand anything he's saying. They can't imagine the messiah dying, so they assume he's speaking in some kind of parable or metaphor, and are too embarrassed to ask what he means. Something crazy happened with Peter, James, and John, and they're not talking about it. Frustration leads to bickering, and of course the disagreement follows. Whose fault is it that they are having these problems? Who's the better disciple? Who's the best? Are John and James the best, since they're the 'thunder' guys? Is Peter the best, because of the whole "You are the Christ" thing? They keep walking, and arguing, and as they get to the next city, Jesus turns to them and asks them what the debate is about.

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### Mark 9:33-37

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be the first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

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The argument about who the greatest is has a core, foundational problem: being in the kingdom of God isn't about being the "best" or the "greatest" or anything of the sort. In this world we put so much emphasis on status. Where do we rank among other people? Does she rank higher than me? Do I rank higher than him? Am I smarter? Am I prettier? Do I have a better car? That's not how Jesus' kingdom operates. This is the opposite of how Jesus tells us to think. I really like the line Matthew includes in his account of this exchange in Matthew 18:3-4

"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Of course, this isn't how the disciples are used to thinking. It isn't how we're used to thinking. The person who wants to be best belongs on top, not on bottom. And as the disciples are taken aback by this challenge from Jesus, a troubling incident comes to mind for John. As Jesus is talking about humility and meekness, John brings up a recent interaction he had with someone:

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Mark 9:38-41

"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward."

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The disciples had seen this guy and decided he wasn't part of their group. They had their own club, their Jesus club, and they had their own membership. Some random guy doing miracles? Who did he think he was? As the "platinum" members of their club, surely it was their duty to make sure that their club was recognized as the exclusive Jesus club, because that is how people think. I'd say even most religion today in the US is more about the "organization" you belong to rather than your actual beliefs and lifestyle. Were you baptized in a church when you were 5 weeks old? Ok, you're a Christian in that church. Show up to church once every two years? Sure, you're on the church membership roster, there you go. Doesn't matter if you don't know a single thing Jesus taught. This is the mistake we make, and the same mistake the disciples were making. It isn't about putting ourselves in an elite group of better people; it's about being connected to God...it's about trusting in the work Jesus did on the cross.

This all reminds me of the issue the apostle Paul was addressing with the church in Rome. When Paul wrote Romans, there were some divisions going on in the church in Rome, particularly between the Jewish and Greek populations. In the early days of Christianity, most Christians were actually Jewish. There were Greek converts growing in number, but the relations between Jews and Greeks in churches varied from city to city. And in Rome, it was starting to become a problem. The Jewish Christians were starting to look down on the Greek Christians...the people that had grown up as pagans worshiping random statues and had almost no understanding of the Jewish scriptures. These people were "unclean" in everything they did. Meanwhile, the Greek converts to Christianity were looking down on

the Jewish Christians. After all, wasn't it the Jewish people that had rejected Jesus' teachings? Weren't they the ones who demanded Jesus be crucified?

A huge portion of Paul's letter seeks to address this division, and he starts in a very interesting way in Romans chapter 1. He actually starts off by talking about God's wrath. He points out all the immorality rampant in the society around them. People worshiping bits of wood and metal as their Gods. People filled with lust, indulging in sexual impurity, homosexuality, and whatever else fits their pleasure.

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Romans 1:29-32

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

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Paul establishes this baseline of a world living in opposition to God (honestly, a baseline that sounds very much like the US right now), and then moves forward with an unexpected twist.

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Romans 2:1 "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgement on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgement do the same things."

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Paul then warns the church that if they continue to play these 'who is the greatest' games, they risk being under God's judgement, writing in verse 4, "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?"

The argument, at its core, is that everything we have is from God. Our forgiveness, our salvation, our hope; it's all a gift that we couldn't earn by our own merit. We aren't deserving of God's love, yet God gives it anyway. As a result, you have no right to put yourself up on a pedestal, because if God didn't lead you toward repentance, you would be just as lost as the rest of the world. As he writes later in Romans 5:8 – "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

So Jesus finishes explaining to his disciples that their mindset should shift to humility, like that of a child. That anyone who welcomes a child in his name, so much as gives a cup of water, is welcoming God. Then, he goes into a warning of what happens when the opposite occurs:

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Mark 9:42-48



And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

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The warning, and the risk, is real. As someone who teaches children myself, it's something I take very seriously. Just as Jesus' brother, James, warns in James 3:1 – "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." According to Jesus, you're better off just drowning in the ocean than bringing misleading teachings to kids in his name. The disciples were worried about who was the best, when the thing they really needed to be worrying about was what kind of examples they were setting and what exactly they were teaching the others watching them. They were worried about arguing with a bunch of lawyer nerds, when they really needed to be focused on praying for that kid in need. If you want to be the greatest, put everyone else before you, and be the servant of all. Don't be arrogant or self-centered by trying to put yourself in an elite group. The kingdom of heaven isn't about who's the best; it's about taking your life and investing in the things that are eternal. It's about the God who died for us so that we'd have a chance. It's about realizing that something needs to change in our lives, and that God offers that change.

Jesus concludes with a final challenge to his disciples:

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Mark 9:49-50

Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

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This is one of the more confusing statements we have from Jesus, particularly in verse 49. Some versions may include a line stating "every sacrifice shall be salted with salt" after the part about being salted with fire. Some people think that the salting of fire has to do with the previous section, about the punishment in hell, while others think it has to do with the disciples being filled with fire from the power of the Holy Spirit. Personally, I tend to lean toward the second interpretation, but regardless the overall message is clear: The disciples need to think carefully about their own hearts and attitudes. Rather than bickering over who is best, they needed to be at peace with each other.

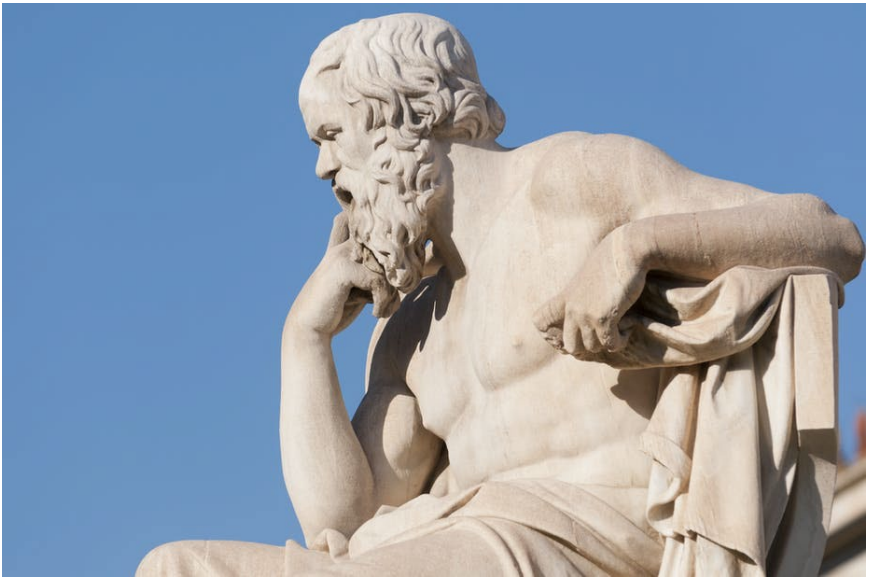
I feel this is an important message to dwell on in the current climate in this country. Too often I see people, even Christians, putting themselves up on a pedestal to show the world how much better they are than everyone else. If you disagree with them, well you must be stupid and not worth listening to. Don't misunderstand; there is truth and there are lies, there is right and there is wrong. This is not an excuse to treat a lie like truth, or pretend that what is immoral is actually moral. We should argue and debate about what is true and what is right, and look to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles and

prophets as our guidance. What we shouldn't be arguing about is who is better; pretending that somehow our church or political or educational affiliation somehow makes us superior to someone else. If that continues to be our mindset, we will continue to live in hostility to everyone around us. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all are in need of salvation.

# WISDOM OF THE AGES

Exploring the book of Proverbs

**Name:**\_\_\_\_\_



# Intro Study

Opening Discussion – How would you define wisdom? Where do you get wisdom from?

## Read - Proverbs 1:20-33

Why is wisdom personified here as someone who is crying out?

What are the characteristics of the two kinds of people described in this passage?

Have you ever seen someone suffer because of their own foolishness? What happened?

## Read - Proverbs 2:1-15

What guidance do we see here about seeking wisdom?

## Searching for wisdom

Create your own memes:

**Proverbs 13:20** Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

**Proverbs 12:15** The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.

**Proverbs 13:10** Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.

**Proverbs 15:5** A fool despises his father's instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is prudent.

Searching through Proverbs this week, see if you can find any that confuse you and jot them down to discuss:

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## Week 1 Devotional 1 – Influence

### Read - Proverbs 4:1-9

We see a father's loving challenge in this passage: get wisdom. While we're young, our parents and teachers will probably be our greatest sources of wisdom for us. Having spent many more years on earth than we have, they've had more opportunity to learn, both from their successes and their failures. And the heart of a loving parent or teacher is always to pass that knowledge down to us, so we can avoid unnecessary pain in life.

Think about the people you go to regularly for wisdom. Are they reliable? Have they demonstrated a life guided by wisdom? Have you been humble enough to listen to their advice? Most of all, are you seeking wisdom from God above everything else? In your prayer time today, ask God to give you a heart that is willing to receive wisdom from those who have it to give.



## Week 1 Devotional 2 – Correction

### Read - Proverbs 13:13-14

One of the hard things about receiving correction is admitting we were wrong. That always takes a great deal of strength; nobody likes to admit to their mistakes. Here we see two sources of correction that can steer us away from harm: the Bible and wise teachers. These things work to guide us away from death and destruction.

Proverbs is filled with this theme: foolish people hate correction, and are ultimately their own source of pain and destruction, while the wise are able to listen to advice and discern what advice is good and what isn't. How good are you at receiving correction? Is it hard? Does it annoy you? Maybe it came in the form of a low score on a test, or maybe a criticism from someone. In your prayer time today, ask for the humility to use these corrections to grow, rather than letting them bring you down with bitterness.



## Week 1 Devotional 3 – Sharper

### Read – Proverbs 27:17

Different types of metals and minerals have different levels of hardness. The harder something is, the more difficult it is to scratch and reshape. Diamond, for instance, is so hard that it can only be scratched by other diamonds. Even the hardest materials known to man can be scratched by contact with an object made of the same material.

Here an analogy is given, comparing us to iron. In the same way you use another piece of iron to sharpen an iron sword, we humans sharpen each other. We want to be around people who “sharpen” us in the right way; challenging us to be better, and ultimately making us stronger and more effective. The process might hurt, but in the end the final product is something powerful. In your prayer time today, ask God to put people in your life that will sharpen you.



## Week 1 Devotional 4 – Discerning

### Read – Proverbs 14:6-8

When it comes to seeking wisdom, sometimes you need to pay more attention to who you need to avoid, and not just who to listen to. We need to watch out for scoffers and mockers and fools; people are happy to distort the truth to serve their own desires. It can be discouraging to be around them, because they'll go out of their way to make fun of people who are eager to do right.

It is often said that the best way to recognize counterfeit money is to know what real money is supposed to look like. In the same way, the best defense we have against the people who try to deceive us is to have a solid foundation in the truth. This comes from seeking God first above all else, and using the Bible as the lens we look through to see the world. In your prayer time today, ask God for greater discernment to know truth.

## Study #2

Opening Discussion – How would you define humility? What is the difference between humility and humiliation? Why is humility important?

### Read - Proverbs 15:31-33

Can you think of an example where you suffered an unnecessary hardship because you ignored advice? How about one you avoided by following advice?

What can we do to grow in humility?

### Read - Proverbs 30:1-6

What perspectives of humility do we see in this passage?

## Searching for wisdom

Create your own memes:

**Proverbs 19:21** Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.

**Proverbs 21:30** There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD.

**Proverbs 22:4** The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life.

**Proverbs 29:1** One who is often reprov'd, yet remains stubborn, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.

Searching through Proverbs this week, see if you can find any that confuse you and jot them down to discuss:

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## Week 2 Devotional 1 – Ego

### Read – Proverbs 27:21

We all like hearing praise from someone else. Whether it's an acknowledgement of a great achievement or a compliment of our character, we always get a little ego boost when we hear something nice about ourselves. Who doesn't like to hear good things about themselves?

This proverb warns us, however, that such compliments can sometimes give us too much of an ego. Will we let it go to our head, or will we receive it with humility? In the same way the heat of the refining process exposes impurities in precious metals like silver and gold, becoming arrogant after a compliment can expose impurities in us. We should examine ourselves carefully to make sure we don't let our egos get the better of us. In your prayer time today, ask for the humility to not get too full of yourself when you are praised, but rather have a humble attitude.

## Week 2 Devotional 2 – Steps

### Read – Proverbs 20:24

If I had a nickel for every time I needed to change my plans, I'd be pretty rich. That's probably true for most of us. We make plans, but there are hundreds of variables that are completely out of our control. If we try to wait until there isn't any uncertainty before we act, we'll find ourselves waiting forever.

This can be frustrating at first, but if we believe God is directing our steps then we can find great comfort. Our path isn't unknown to God; He's watching us and ensuring that we are reaching the necessary destination. There may be times of confusion, and there may be times of clarity, but faith allows us to press forward even when we don't understand why God is allowing certain things to happen. In your prayer time today, ask God for the wisdom to better understand His purposes, and the faith to keep going during uncertainty.

## Week 2 Devotional 3 – Image

### Read – Proverbs 12:9

A big, expensive mansion. Fine jewelry. Driveway filled with expensive luxury cars. These are some of the things our society will put forward as evidence that someone is “successful” in life. Some people are so obsessed with their image that they’ll literally spend themselves into poverty to show off how “successful” they are.

This proverb is a good warning: you’re better off letting everyone think you’re poor than pretending to be someone wealthy. Focusing on your image creates an endless game of always trying to get more than the person next to you; you’re never satisfied with what you have. Not only does it deplete your wallet, it also depletes your joy. In your prayer time today, confess any tendency in your heart to make yourself seem greater than you actually are, and ask for contentment with what you have.



## Week 2 Devotional 4 – Mockers

### Read - Proverbs 15:10-12

Mockers. Scoffers. People who always look for the excuse to make fun of others. Insults and derision are their native tongue. It's painful to be around people like that, but in the end it's far more painful to be one of them. They don't like correction. They don't accept advice. They do whatever feels right at the time.

Mixed in with these proverbs is a reminder that God sees all things; even the hearts of such people. If God sees even what is in Sheol and Abaddon (terms refereeing to hell and destruction), then even the hearts of these mockers are open to Him. Since God sees our hearts, let us always try to act with the attitude that God is watching us. Rather than making fun of others, let's look to see what wisdom we can gain from them. In your prayer time today, ask God to give you a heart that chooses to listen rather than mock.

## Study #3

Opening Discussion – What emotion do you have difficulty controlling? What happens when you lose control?

### Read - Proverbs 16:32

What does it mean to rule your spirit?  
Why does it make you strong?

### Read - Proverbs 12:25

What power do words have in helping us control our emotions?

### Read - Proverbs 18:24

What people have you had in your life that knew the right words to say at the right time to help you?

## Searching for wisdom

Create your own memes:

**Proverbs 19:11** Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook and offense.

**Proverbs 18:14** A man's spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?

**Proverbs 14:10** The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy.

**Proverbs 19:2** Desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses the way.

Searching through Proverbs this week, see if you can find any that confuse you and jot them down to discuss:

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## Week 3 Devotional 1 – Anger

### Read – Proverbs 15:18

Are you someone who makes a conflict better or worse? Can you calm down escalating emotions, or do you exacerbate them? It takes a great deal of wisdom and self-control to be the person that quiets contention. It requires intentional work, and rarely happens on its own.

There is great reward, however, in being able to calm down a conflict. Whether they are conflicts involving you or not, being able to calm things down makes it easier to work with other people and accomplish difficult tasks. Resolving conflicts makes it easier to rest and relax without having the burden of worrying if things will get worse. Most of all it brings us closer to God, who desires peace and reconciliation with those who have rebelled against Him. In your prayer time today, ask for a heart that desires peace, and the wisdom to know how to bring it.



## Week 3 Devotional 2 – Jealousy

### Read – Proverbs 27:4

There are many emotions that can tear us down and derail us, but jealousy has a particularly unique power. Jealousy is the emotion that tells us “things are better over there” or “they have it so much better than you” and causes us to abandon what we have to chase after something we don’t. It causes us to resent other people simply because of what they have.

This resentment festers in us, and robs us of our joy and peace. The key to resisting jealousy is to regularly reflect on the blessings God has given us that we are thankful for. We need to remind ourselves that God has given us far more than we deserve already. Did you know that if you have \$20 in your house and food in your refrigerator, you are one of the wealthiest people on the planet? Four or five billion people don’t have that right now. In your prayer time

today, thank God for all the blessings He has given you.

## Week 3 Devotional 3 – Sorrow

### Read – Proverbs 14:13

We will all experience sorrow in life. Whether because of loss or hardships, the things we go through can leave us disappointed and wondering how we can keep going. This proverb reminds us that people might have different ways of coping with those emotions. Some people may try to put up a front of laughing and being happy. Others might try to drown out their sorrow with distractions or even addictions. Anything that takes our mind off of the pain, even if it hurts us.

Sometimes a distraction to keep our mind off the sorrow can be a good thing, but we should make sure it's the right distraction. Something that empowers us, rather than something that weakens us. Something that reminds us that God has greater things for us. Jesus reminds us that we are blessed when we mourn, because those who mourn will be



comforted. In your prayer time today,  
ask God to be your comfort in sorrow.

## Week 3 Devotional 4 – Fear

### Read – Proverbs 19:23

There are many things in life that cause us to back off in fear. Sometimes our fears are justified, and sometimes they can be a little irrational. Sometimes our fears can be so great, they paralyze us and leave us unable to act.

If we are to be afraid of the things that have the power to harm us, there is one fear that should trump all: a fear of God. God's power is above all things. At first this proverb seems a little extreme, promising that we won't suffer harm if we have a fear of God. Of course we'll still suffer pain and hardships no matter how much we fear and trust God, but when we acknowledge God's power we also have the assurance that God will see us through toward heaven and eternal life. We aren't abandoned. We aren't terrified of God; rather, we acknowledge that He is greater than all the things we could fear. In your prayer

time today, thank God for being stronger  
than your fears.

## Study #4

Opening Discussion – What is the most difficult conflict you've ever had to navigate?

### Read - Proverbs 26:17-28

How do you determine when you need to intervene in a conflict?

What is the danger of deception?

What is the danger of gossip?

How can traps people set backfire?

What is the difference between encouraging and flattering?

## Searching for wisdom

Create your own memes:

**Proverbs 24:26** An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.

**Proverbs 27:3** Stone is heavy and sand a burden, but a fool's provocation is heavier than both.

**Proverbs 25:15** With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.

**Proverbs 18:19** A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle.

Searching through Proverbs this week, see if you can find any that confuse you and jot them down to discuss:

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## Week 4 Devotional 1 – Evil

### Read – Proverbs 24:17-20

It can be difficult to know how to respond to people who do evil. There is no shortage of evil people in this world, and if we make it our goal to follow God and do good we're going to find ourselves making enemies with a few of them.

These proverbs give us a little balance on how to respond to this kind of evil. For one thing, don't let yourself stress too much about them, because in the end evil will be destroyed. God will win the war. While we wait, however, we want to see people who do evil repent and start doing good. We want to see the salvation that God brought to us go out to others as well. So don't rejoice when you see evil people suffering; that isn't what God wants and it shouldn't be what we want. Instead, rejoice when you see evil people repent and turn to God. This is a difficult thing to do, but in your prayer time today ask God for the

strength to pray for repentance for your enemies.

## Week 4 Devotional 2 – Fools

### Read – Proverbs 26:3-5

It can be difficult to know how to respond to a fool. In the proverbs, a fool refers not only to someone who is stupid, but someone who is immoral. They lack both knowledge and a moral compass.

In these three proverbs we see three potential ways to respond. The first is to just smack them. The second is to ignore them. The third is to respond to them. At first these can seem like contradictions, but they are actually giving us a balance. First we are reminded that immoral people usually won't respond to reason. That's why we call the police to arrest criminals, rather than try to use words. Likewise, we don't want to stoop down to their level and start arguing like they do. However, we also want to make sure everyone knows not to listen to them, so we want to make some effort to show that they're wrong. In your prayer time today,



ask for wisdom to know how to respond to these situations.

## Week 4 Devotional 3 – Hopeless

### Read - Proverbs 26:6-12

Here we have a whole list of how hopeless and useless fools are. Everything they say or do just makes things worse. But then this list finishes with a warning: fools may be hopeless, but if you are full of yourself, if you think you're wiser than you actually are, you're even more hopeless than a fool.

Ouch, that cuts pretty deep, but it's true. When we become arrogant and cut ourselves off to advice and correction, we become just as dangerous to ourselves as a fool is. We do ourselves great harm when we hide behind the excuse "You can't be the judge of me!" to ignore the advice of someone else. In contrast, the ancient philosopher Socrates is known for saying that he was the wisest because he understood that he knew nothing. And ultimately, however great we are, we know that God is greater. In your prayer time

today, ask for a healthy level of humility,  
so we can accept correction.

## Week 4 Devotional 4 – Resist

### Read – Proverbs 25:26

You may have heard the saying “Evil triumphs when good men do nothing.” There is some truth to that; we will always find ourselves faced with pressure to compromise on what is right, and it requires great conviction to resist the temptation to give in to evil. Of course we want to live at peace with those around us as much as we can, but sometimes we need to put our foot down and say no to what is wrong, even if it leads to conflict. Otherwise we’re just letting evil win.

This proverb reminds us that just muddy water becomes bad to drink, a righteous person who gives way to evil can lose their ability to be a light to this world. So when other options have been exhausted, sometimes the answer to evil is to stand up and fight. In your prayer time today, ask God for the wisdom to know when to stand up and fight

against evil, and the strength for the  
days of battle.

## Study #5

Opening Discussion – What’s the most difficult job you’ve ever had to do? What was the reward for completing the task?

### Read - Proverbs 27:23-27

What does it mean to “know the condition of your flock” for us today?

How do we become efficient at our work?

What is the reward promised here?

### Read - Proverbs 24:30-34

What is a sluggard? What is the danger we see here?

## Searching for wisdom

Create your own memes:

**Proverbs 14:4** Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but from the strength of an ox come abundant harvests.

**Proverbs 13:11** Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it.

**Proverbs 12:14** From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man's hand comes back to him.

**Proverbs 23:4** Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist.

Searching through Proverbs this week, see if you can find any that confuse you and jot them down to discuss:

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## Week 5 Devotional 1 – Sleep

### Read – Proverbs 20:13

“Just five more minutes, Mom!” Ever said those words as your mom tries to wake you up for school? It can sometimes be difficult to wake up in the morning, especially if we had a busy night. Of course we need at least 7 or 8 hours of sleep to function at our best the next day, but spending too much time sleeping and resting will deprive us of many opportunities.

Getting a good pattern in your life is important for good sleep. Regularly going to sleep and waking up at the same time helps your body set an internal clock (called circadian rhythm) that makes it easier to wake up, go to sleep, and keeps you healthier. Work on your schedule so you're getting enough sleep to keep you productive during the day, and don't let laziness keep you from doing great things. In your prayer time today, ask God to help you put together



a productive schedule, so you don't miss out on opportunities.

## Week 5 Devotional 2 – Generosity

### Read - Proverbs 14:31

One of the sad things I see here in the Bay Area is the growing problem of poverty and homelessness. Go to the right places and you'll see entire communities living in tents. Living in poverty opens people up to many dangers, things like crime or exploitation, and there are a lot of people who will take advantage of that.

Our goal as followers of Christ is to be generous to those in need and help where we can. Whether it's right here in our home city or in other countries like Haiti, there is tremendous joy in helping other people get back on their feet and put their lives together. And remember, the same God who created us created others in need around us, and perhaps He puts people in our lives so we can help them with what we've been blessed with. Be wise in how you help others, but also be generous. Work hard so you

can give. In your prayer time today, ask for more opportunities to help others.

## Week 5 Devotional 3 – Honesty

### Read – Proverbs 20:10

Imagine going to the grocery store and buying a pound of apples, only for the store to charge you for buying two pounds. Or buying five gallons of gas from the gas station only for them to charge you for six. A lot of people think that cheating can be a shortcut to getting ahead in life, and dishonest business practices have been around for a long time. This proverb describes people who would sell things while lying about how much they were giving to the customer. They would use a false weight to make it look like it was more than it really was.

God warns us that He hates it when people do that. We must resist the urge to be dishonest in our work, reminding ourselves that God values honesty. People might cheat on their taxes, lie about their products, commit all kinds of fraud, but we are called to a higher

standard. In your prayer time today, ask for power to resist the temptation to lie.

## Week 5 Devotional 4 – Desire

### Read – Proverbs 13:19

I'm sure we've all felt the joy of seeing our hard work on a project finally come to fruition. The moment when we finally achieve a goal we've worked very hard to reach. There may be times we want to give up, but if we keep pressing forward we'll find the end result is worth it...assuming we're pursuing a worthy goal.

This proverb is a reminder of the joy that comes when we finally achieve an objective, but also a warning to make sure it's a good one, and not evil. It reminds us that fools will often have very evil objectives, and they'll hate turning away from them. Sometimes they'll even achieve them, and it will make them very happy...for a while. But in the end, God always prevails, and those who pursue evil will always suffer for it. In your prayer time today, ask for help in setting the right goals, and the strength to keep pursuing them.

## Study #6

Opening Discussion – What do you think are the most difficult temptations to resist? Why?

### Read – Proverbs 6:12-15

What is the wicked man doing in this description?

What is the end result?

Do you think evil people sometimes get away with what they do?

### Read – Proverbs 6:16-19

Where do we see these things God hates around us today?

## Searching for wisdom

Create your own memes:

**Proverbs 20:1** Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

**Proverbs 11:18** The wicked earns deceptive wages, but one who sows righteousness gets a sure reward.

**Proverbs 20:19** Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babbler.

**Proverbs 22:8** Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail.

Searching through Proverbs this week, see if you can find any that confuse you and jot them down to discuss:

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## Week 6 Devotional 1 – Drunkenness

### Read – Proverbs 23:29-35

There are few things I've seen in life more tragic than a life destroyed by alcohol. It often starts with something that seems harmless; a little drinking at a party here, a little dare from a friend there...maybe some tragedy that drives someone to just drown out their sorrows and dull their pain. These verses remind us that the end result of that is a life that's left a slave to the alcohol, with no escape.

I've seen great examples of times God has rescued people from such a path, but I've also seen examples of lives that were cut tragically short by addiction. Ideally, we want to help people break free of things that have taken them captive, because God loves saving lives. And remember, when you go through difficult times and you're tempted to turn to something dangerous to dull the pain, God will always give you a healthy solution to turn to instead. In your

prayer time today, ask for God to protect you from addiction.

## Week 6 Devotional 2 – Greed

### Read – Proverbs 11:24-26

People often think that the only way to be secure in life is to focus just on yourself, and never worry about anyone else. When taken to the extreme, a focus on just ourselves can lead us into greed, where all that matters is accumulating more and more possessions, even to the harm of ourselves and those around us.

Part of what sets us free from greed is understanding that everything in this world is temporary. Even the nicest things will decay over time, so we don't put our security in them. Instead, we put our security in God, who is faithful to provide for our needs, not just for this life but also for eternity. We will not get all the things we may want, all the things greed may drive us to desire, but God will bless us not only with what we need but also to be a blessing to others around us. In your prayer time today,

thank God for His provision, and pray for opportunities to be a blessing to others.

## 6 Devotional 3 – Adultery

### Read – Proverbs 6:27-33

The sanctity of marriage is something that is being increasingly disregarded in our current society. As all kinds of sexual immorality are celebrated more each day all around us, the virtue of staying faithful to a single spouse for better or worse, in sickness or in health, is seen as archaic and obsolete. Why be committed to one person when there are so many other things to explore?

But God was intentional when He created the relationship of marriage, and even if it seems fun to go against it for a while, you'll find people always suffer as a result. In the same way you can't hold fire for long without getting burned, you can't chase after bad relationships for long before you start hurting. There is great wisdom in knowing to avoid bad relationships, no matter how strong the temptation. In your prayer time today, ask for protection against lust and

sexual immorality, and the pain they cause.

## 6 Devotional 4 – Gluttony

### Read – Proverbs 25:16

You can have too much of a good thing. Whether it's your favorite food or your favorite entertainment (maybe even your cell phone), overindulging in something can do tremendous harm to someone. In the same way eating too much of something sweet will make you sick to your stomach, or perhaps give you diabetes, this proverb reminds us that we need to be careful our pleasures don't consume us and mess up our lives.

This is something we really need to think about here in the USA, because we have greater access to pleasures, food, wealth, and entertainment than any other place on the planet. There's a reason obesity is such an epidemic here. When I'm in Haiti, they look at us here in the US as if we have unlimited wealth, because in their eyes we do. So let's be careful that we don't let our cravings destroy us. In your prayer time today, ask God to give you strength to control your cravings.

# Final Study

Opening Discussion – What is the most helpful or encouraging thing anyone has ever said to you?

## Read - Proverbs 18:21

Why do you think our words are so powerful?

## Read - Proverbs 18:6-7

Have your words ever gotten you in trouble? How do we avoid that?

## Read - Proverbs 28:23

How do you correct someone without getting them angry?

## Read - Proverbs 10:32



## Notes:

[illegible]



## MEMORY VERSE

Proverbs 16:16 How much better  
to get wisdom than gold, to get  
insight rather than silver!

Woe to...who?

As we were chatting during my Sunday School class this week, we were sharing different stories. One girl shared an interesting objection she had heard from another kid about Christianity: "If Jesus was such a good person, why was he killed?"

Wow, such a powerful question. It touches on so many themes, and challenges so much of how we view ourselves. I think it's a good question for us to visit, especially during this Easter season: How do people, in the span of less than a week, go from "Hosanna to the Son of David!" to "Crucify him!" with a guy who did nothing but going around healing and teaching? What causes us to turn on someone who has been nothing but holy and righteous?

I think a lot of us like to focus on the nice things Jesus does for people (healing, feeding, raising the dead) when we read the gospels, and we often skip over the things he teaches that sound really harsh. Jesus actually clashed with a lot of people in his ministry, but they weren't the people you'd normally expect a major religious figure to clash with. The people that were seen as "dirty" and "sinners" were the people Jesus went to the most, and they loved him. When none of the other religious leaders would come close to these rejects, Jesus was there healing and forgiving. Tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers...all the people shunned by society at the time, Jesus was noted most for going to them. On the contrary, the people Jesus clashed with the most were actually the ones that seemed the most religious. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the religious experts; those were the ones he was always attacking, and the ones who ultimately plotted to have him killed.

During his final week before his crucifixion, Jesus had one last round of arguments with these religious leaders. After humiliating them in public debates on topics that were brought up in attempts to trap him, Jesus turns to the crowds and his disciples that were following him, and warns them about these pretenders:

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Matthew 23:1-3

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

5-7

"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'"

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After highlighting these leaders as nothing but a bunch of frauds, he then turns to the leaders and speaks to them directly, in front of the entire crowd:

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“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

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Living in a different culture and in a different time, it’s difficult for us to wrap our minds around how shocking these statements really are. These are the most powerful people in the city that Jesus is criticizing. They were the wealthy elite, the people held up as role models, the ones who supposedly had special access to God. And here Jesus is, exposing all their double standards. Their nonsensical standards for when they need to keep their promises and when they don’t. Their absurdity in creating large, fancy, elaborate boxes (phylacteries) to wear that really only contained a small page or so worth of Bible verses, just so they can show off. Their notion that it was more important to measure out a tenth of their mint leaves for their tithing than to be merciful to the poor and weak around them. They

put up a front of righteousness, but on the inside they were only concerned with themselves and their own success.

I think we all have this desire to put up this front claiming to be righteous and good. We want a good reputation; we want people to respect and admire us. The problem with Jesus is he walks right past that front we put up and exposes what's behind. All the stuff we don't want other people to see; the stuff that reveals that we really aren't as good as we pretend to be. When that happens, we can have one of two reactions: anger and denial, or sorrow and repentance. Nothing gets a self-righteous person angrier than being confronted with their own faults, and we see that fully manifested in these religious leaders Jesus exposes. And so, things play out exactly as you'd expect them to after watching a poor, yet popular, son of a carpenter challenge the authority of the wealthiest, most influential people in a city: the plan is quickly set in motion, the betrayal is set up, and these religious leaders use all the power they have to get Jesus executed. Not to be outdone, Jesus naturally uses his power a few days later to just come back to life, but that's a story for Sunday.

I've been thinking about chapter 23 in Matthew a lot this year...I suppose because lately at my church the question has come up of who the modern day Pharisees are that Jesus would be going up against. When Jesus says "Woe to you," who exactly is he talking to? I've seen a lot of strange ideas being proposed, most of which I don't really agree with and I think tend to miss the point. I've seen people identify Pharisees in right wing Christian fundamentalists, in left wing social justice warriors, in people who like quoting the Bible a lot, or even just a vague "people who aren't loving" standard. Maybe people who know the Bible but don't put it into practice. Ideas all over the place, really.

I think these skate around a Pharisee, but they don't quite hit the core. And it should be noted, there were Pharisees and Sadducees that Jesus didn't clash with; people like Nicodemus that went to Jesus in secret to talk with him without the crowds. At their core, a Pharisee was just someone who held to a very strict set of Jewish rituals and laws with the intent to usher in the kingdom of God with their righteous living. Theologically, out of all the Jewish groups at the time, the Pharisees were actually the closest to Jesus in terms of their emphasis on the importance of righteous and holy living.

The clashes were all centered on one key thing: hypocrisy. People who were concerned with their own reputations, rather than the truth. The illusion of righteousness, rather than a proper understanding and pursuit of righteousness. It's the people who selfishly seek after those places of honor at banquets, the people who want their names listed as big donors for organizations and events, the people who work to surround themselves with others who will tell them how great they are, and work everything they can to discredit the ones who dare criticize them. They find the easiest things they can do that will give them the widest recognition. They prefer empty ritual rather than a transformed life. They want to be at the important meetings where important decisions are made, and they want to make sure that everyone hears their opinions. They may or may not enjoy sermons that point out sin in the world, but they hate even the slightest implication that there is anything wrong with them. They pick and choose

the teachings they want based on what is personally convenient for them. God isn't the focus of their theology; the focus always remains on themselves.

Can we fall into these categories at times? Sure, I think these are really easy temptations to fall into, and we do it all the time. Whenever I secretly look for recognition for something I did, whenever my reflex is to justify myself when someone points out when I'm out of line, even when I think that I'm too important tasks that are considered more menial. But the important thing is to recognize these attitudes as we're studying the Bible, and acknowledging the areas in our hearts that don't align with God's will. When we're confronted with our own sinfulness, rather than cover it up or justify ourselves, we examine our own hearts and desire the removal of sin from our lives. It requires a greater focus on who we are on the inside, with less focus on what we look like on the outside.

There are two answers to the question of why Jesus was crucified. One side is the perspective of God; Jesus was crucified to pay the punishment for our sins, to earn a salvation that we couldn't earn on our own. But from the perspective of people, Jesus was crucified because exposed something in ourselves that we didn't want exposed: the fact that we needed salvation in the first place. He exposed our own hypocrisy and selfishness, the fact that we fail at the righteous standard set by God, and rather than confessing to it, the response of humanity was to silence him. The irony always is that the messages we need to hear the most are usually the ones we least want to hear. Each Easter leaves us with a choice: will we listen to the message that caused Jesus to be crucified and take it to heart, or will we close our ears and push it away?

This Sunday, we looked at Matthew 8 and 9, and saw Jesus doing a lot of work. He's doing miracles, healing people, stopping storms, teaching, arguing with religious leaders...there just seems to be no end to it. Everywhere he turns, there's need, and I love how Matthew ends chapter 9, with verses 35-39

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. <sup>36</sup>When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup>Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup>Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

There was a video I saw last week that I found very interesting; it was a short clip of a shepherd who finds one of his sheep stuck on her back, with no way to roll over onto her feet. She must have been that way for a few hours, and by the time he finds her, she's too weak to stand herself up. It takes a few hours of very gentle care to help the sheep recover, and get to moving around again. Without the shepherd, she was completely helpless, and would have been attacked by a predator if she had stayed in that state for much longer.

This video really reminded me of Jesus' attitude to these crowds. He looks at them the same way this shepherd looks at his sheep; he sees those who are helpless and in despair, and he has to give them hope. He has to give them the gospel.

Lara-

But Jesus isn't planning on doing all this work by himself; God set up the church so that we would participate in this work as the body of Christ. Jesus points out to his disciples in verse 37 that there is much work to be done, but not enough people doing it. And here Jesus tells his disciples to pray a very interesting prayer; that God would send out workers to do this work. He doesn't tell them to pray about themselves, or that God would send them, or even explicitly tell them that they're the ones to go out; just pray that God sends someone. And here we see God's plan at work, because later in our story the disciples are the ones who go out and do this work. They become the answer to their own prayers as they continue to walk with Jesus.

Matt-

One of the lies the culture around us says is that you should keep your faith to yourself; it's a private thing and people will be offended if you talk to them about God. And, maybe some people will, but by keeping our faith to ourselves we lose out on the chance to give hope to those around us who are hurting. I can tell you from my own life, dealing with cancer a couple times now, dealing with the craziness of the PhD, and all kinds of setbacks and difficulties; it's the word of God that has helped me continue to have confidence and hope throughout every struggle. The power of God is real, and it works in our lives. Giving others the chance to feel that themselves is the greatest gift you can give them, and the privilege to do that shouldn't be taken lightly.

Lara-

Even before my illness, God was similarly challenging me to recognize that the importance of the eternal things far outweigh the importance of the temporary worldly things, and this hope is what has sustained me through my temporary painful circumstances. 2 Corinthians 4:17 and 18 says

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

It's verses like these that have helped me weather the greatest storms I've gone through, and even though I have times of great despair, I still get up and push through, knowing that God has a purpose for all my suffering.

Matt-

And in order to have this hope, this power, we needed to have someone willing to share the gospel with us. We needed a worker who was out in the field, working on the harvest. And now, even though we've both faced a lot of suffering, we're able to be those workers who go out and meet others in their suffering. In fact, one of the things that has helped me share the gospel the most is the suffering that I've been through.

Lara-

I agree Matt, the thing that came to mind when you said that is Genesis 41:52, where Joseph gives his son the name Ephraim because God had made him fruitful in the land of his affliction. Because of my illness, I've had unique chances throughout this journey, whether it be friends, former colleagues, or even nurses to share how God has sustained me, and what I put my ultimate hope in.

Matt-

Yep, when I was in the hospital last year, after one of our prayer sessions, a nurse came in to my room and looked around and said, there's something different in here. So let's not neglect the work we're called to. The path is difficult, and there will be hardships on the way, but the reward is great, and something that lasts for eternity. So this week, pray that the Lord would send out workers into the harvest.

Lara-

You never know, it might be you.



Proverbs 24:27 - Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house.

When we have a lot of different tasks to do, sometimes it can be difficult to know how to prioritize them. Do I do the most important thing first? Do I finish the quickest task to get it out of the way? Do I do the hardest thing first?

This proverb gives us an interesting perspective; faced with the choice of getting your fields ready to grow food or getting your home comfortable to live in, focus on the field first. Comfort can wait, but the timing of planting and harvesting crops sometimes leaves very little room for error. And while we generally aren't farmers here in the Bay Area, there are some important principles we can pull from a proverb like this. Before you start thinking about comfort and luxury, you need to make sure you have a stable source of income.

This might seem obvious, but you'll notice a lot of people in our current culture are more concerned with living an extravagant lifestyle than having financial stability. Their desire to impress other people has them buying things that are more expensive than they can really afford. Fancy cars, expensive clothing...and in the end it never feels like enough. Take a look at

Proverbs 13:7 – One pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.

We've talked about this before, but it really is true that a lot of people in our society are so caught up in their image they spend themselves into poverty. They want the comfortable, luxurious home, they want people to be jealous of them, but they don't pay any attention to their fields. And let's be clear, there's nothing wrong with being comfortable. Life is not supposed to be an endless chain of pain and suffering, but remember that we need to prioritize things properly. There's no point in having a house worth millions of dollars if you're starving.

Proverbs 12:11 – Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.

Of course we don't really have land that we work; maybe a backyard that we grow some vegetables in, but this proverb is about more than just growing food. We each have different gifts and resources God has given us, and he wants us to use them for something productive. Following worthless pursuits is like, chasing after those get rich quick schemes. Trying to find shortcuts in life without really doing the work. Whatever profession we end up going into, it's going to take work to get ready for. We'll need to study and train, and as we're faithful with the things God has given us God will be faithful to provide for us. We could also make the mistake of getting jealous of someone else's path, wishing we had the gifts and opportunities they had, and as a result we miss out on the things God has given us. We're so focused on someone else's land we lose sight of our own. This proverb reminds us not to forget about the work God has assigned to us, whatever it is, because there is great reward in completing it.

So be mindful of the things that are worthwhile to pursue, and work for them. God's prepared good work in advance for us to do, so let's be faithful in the things He's given us.