



Daily Devotions
from your pastors



What Does That Have To Do With Me?

1 Peter 2:9

"Duties are ours; events are God's." That's what Samuel Rutherford said about people trying to change God's agenda. He continues, "It is our part to let the Almighty exercise His own office, and steer His own helm; there is nothing left for us, but to see how we may be approved of Him."

Just 11 days into the new year, news about a virus from China came out. Initial reports said it was from people eating infected bats; later reports blamed it on a biologist working in a lab in Wuhan province. As people still develop theories about the cause and origin of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) people are responding in a variety of ways. Some are panicking, some are blowing it off completely, some are taking extra precautions and some are taking very few.

But almost everyone is asking, "What does this have to do with me?" In other words we want to know what our role is in responding to the threat of infection. Do we self-quarantine? Do we make a run on the grocery store for toilet paper and bottled water? Do we go about our daily business and hope for the best? What is required of me?

The short answer? Goodness.

Not your goodness. God's goodness. In Peter's letter to the dispersed Jews he reminds them of God's goodness and the need to remain faithful.

1Pe 1:7 NLT *These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold--though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.*

The image he is presenting to the readers is that of gold being purified. The way metal is purified is by melting it so that impurities, called dross, floats to the top and is scooped out. The process happens repeatedly, with more heat being added. What is left is a metal that is more pure and, therefore, more valuable.

Later in the letter, Peter says, *But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light (1Pe 2:9 NLT).*

Peter leads the people to consider two things about themselves:

1. That the hardships they face should drive them to God.
2. That the goodness they display should drive others to God.

"What does that have to do with me?"

Reading 1 Peter 2:9 again, notice the description Peter gives to the people of God: chosen people, royal priests, holy nation, God's possession.

Are you acting like it? Are you panicking like those who do not know God? Or are you taking precautions while also looking for ways to display God's goodness to others?

Are you moving in the direction of the Throne?

Are you moving others in the direction of the Throne?

Sometimes we get caught up in wondering WHY this is happening? Who's to blame? What evil is responsible? Why didn't God stop it, or why did God cause/allow it? The truth is we don't know God's purpose, but we have an idea of how God's people can utilize the opportunity.

As Samuel Rutherford said, "Duties are ours; events are God's."

So what is your duty in the midst of this crisis? The President has his duty. He has a team of people who have a clear responsibility. Hospitals have their clear responsibilities. The CDC has a clear responsibility. But do you? Have you stopped to ask God, "What can I do to show Your goodness?"

Do you need to stop being anxious and to start offering praise to God? Is there someone you know who has a need you can meet to show God's love and provision for them?

Maybe your starting point needs to be strengthening your faith. It is okay to express your doubts and fears to God. He can soothe those. He can and does work with our weakness, but He so much wants to be our strength.

As you go through the day, consider these:

1. Where does my faith need to be strengthened?
2. Where does God's goodness need to be displayed?

To close in prayer,

"Father, thank You for Your goodness. In Your goodness You have created me, drawn me to You, and bought me. I know You have more work to do in me and I want to be made pure. If You have to add heat to my life to remove the dross, I trust You. I trust that You will do what is necessary to make me more like Your Son, Jesus. I also know that there are people around me that need to see Your goodness. I need to display that to them. Give me clear direction, names and faces, as I go through the day, of people to minister to. Give me the boldness and compassion to carry Your name and to speak it as I display Your love. In the Name of Jesus I thank You and ask this. Amen."

Pastor Art Stafford

Unswerving and Spurring

Hebrews 10:23-24

"Don't swerve for squirrels."

That's just good advice. When someone is driving and, in an act of compassion, swerves to avoid a squirrel who can't decide which direction to run in the street, there is a possibility they will end up in a ditch or hitting a tree.

I'm reminded of an episode of Seinfeld (because I'm ALWAYS reminded of episodes of Seinfeld) where George is driving and his girlfriend, in a panic, yells to watch out for a pigeon in the road. He swerves and she gets mad because he hit a squirrel in the process. Long story short, he spent several hundred dollars taking care of this squirrel. Out of curiosity he asked the vet, "How much would it have cost me to put him down?"

The vet answered, "We charge by the pound, so about 80 cents."

Everyone knows that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. When trying to reach a goal, the easiest way to get there is to run straight to it. Sometimes obstacles come up that we have to avoid, but sometimes the things we try to avoid are not REALLY obstacles, just inconveniences or distractions.

The writer of Hebrews tells us this:

Hebrews 10:23-24-*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,*

These statements are in the middle of a call to consciously pursue holiness in gratitude and honor of the One Who saved us. Go back and read chapter 10 from the beginning to get a sense of the tone. In short, however, this was less a request and more a demand.

"This is a God who saw you, called you, provided a sacrifice for you and set up a priest to intercede for you, so knock off the sinning, gather together, pursue holiness, hold onto hope, and love and serve each other." That's pretty much what he said to do.

In the middle of all the uncertainty, it is easy to become discouraged. How long is this going to last? How will I provide for my family? When can I go back to work? Can I leave the house? Can I see my parents (or children)? Should I cancel this trip or that trip?

Look at verse 23: *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful.*

Faithful to do what? Faithful to fulfill every promise He has made! Hold UNSWERVINGLY (without getting off-track, without obstacle) to the hope you claim to have. God is big enough to create the world and to redeem

you, so you know He is big enough to care for your needs in the smaller ways.

Of course, prayer is an imperative. Now you have more time than you used to (at least most of us) to focus not on where you need to be next or what other commitment you have made, so spend extra time in stillness and in prayer.

CS Lewis, when his wife had cancer and was dying, prayed day and night for her, hoping to move God to heal her. When she died, one of his fellow professors, an atheist, asked him why he prayed so much. He didn't really think he could change God's mind, did he?

He answered, "It's not so much that my prayer changed God. But instead, prayer changed me." He later fleshed out that thought in his written works.

If you need to gain more hope to hang onto, spend extra time in prayer, expressing everything to God, who knows it already anyway.

The author of Hebrews continues on, however in verse 24: *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*

Not only should we hope and pray, but we are also to prompt each other to do good. There is still good to do in this world, in your neighborhood. It is one thing to do good yourself, but this is an opportunity to invite others in to serve as well, either beside you or in ways you can't. This is how the love of Christ is displayed to those

around us. It is one thing to be a good neighbor; it's another to be a godly neighbor.

In short, we can cower in our homes and wonder how God is going to fix this, or we can see that God is giving us new opportunities to display His goodness and to love our neighbor.

Place your trust in God that He will fulfill His promises, then show others that you trust Him by doing something good and demanding that your brothers and sisters do the same.

"Thank You, Lord, for the hope You have given me. Thank You that You hold me up with Your hand and You protect me. As I get concerned about all that I don't know, let my trust be not in the experts, but in the Exalted; not in the president, but in the Prince; not in the healers, but in the Healer. Only You know everything, and that everything includes me. You know where I need hope and only You can provide it and boost it. You know what my neighbors need and how I can meet those needs. And you know that if I can't, You can point me to someone who can. Use me in a new way, giving me a new hope and a new witness. I love You, Jesus. Amen."

Pastor Art Stafford

First Thing First!

Isaiah 33

There is a massive scramble worldwide to find the answer to solving the problem of the Coronavirus pandemic. Everyone has good questions. Experts are giving their opinions. Leaders are making various decisions. But few are turning to God for what we need. There in lies our biggest problem! Everyone is looking for a solution in all the wrong places. Very few are talking to God. God should be the very **first** Person that we turn to for answers. Sadly, God is brought into the conversation only ... only when we have exhausted all other options.

Isaiah 33 describes just such a dark day for the people of God, the nation of Israel. This passage describes how a deadly Assyrian king came against God's people. He was every bit as dangerous as the deadly virus we face today.

Isaiah message is directed against Sennacherib because of his treachery against Judah, a story which is found in 2 Kings 18:13-16. These were terrifying days for God's people with Israel having been carried off into captivity by the nation of Assyria, and now the Assyrian army was being staged to invade Judah.

Dr. Tony Evans ... *Have you ever experienced what it is like for God to have your back? That is an awesome thing. But too many people never get to experience that because they refuse to put Him first. This is His kingdom and He is the rightful King ... putting Him any other place than first is foolishness.*

Psalms 25:5 (NLT) ... *“Lead me by your truth and teach me, for you are the God who saves me. All day long I put my hope in you.”*

Q ... So what did king Hezekiah do?

1. Hezekiah first chose to trust only in a **man made** solution to his nation's problem.

... in doing so ... he demonstrated a lack of faith in God.

... he thought he could buy off the Assyrian tyrant and his army.
... bottom line ... he tried to fix their problem **without** asking God for help! ... **without** even consulting God!

To be honest ... their lack of faith in God was their real problem! Their lack of trust and dependence on God was the real reason why God had allowed the Assyrians to come against them in the first place.

So a man made solution was implemented ... a deal was made ... but Sennacherib broke his word and invade Judah anyway. The result: Jerusalem was now surrounded and in deep, deep trouble.

2 Kings 18:13-17a (NLT) ... *“In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, King Sennacherib of Assyria came to attack the fortified cities of Judah and conquered them. [14] King Hezekiah sent this message to the king of Assyria at Lachish: ‘I have done wrong. I will pay whatever tribute money you demand if you will only go away.’ The king of Assyria then demanded a settlement of more than eleven tons of silver and about one ton of gold. [15] To gather this amount, King Hezekiah used all the silver stored in the Temple of the Lord and in the palace treasury. [16] Hezekiah even stripped the gold from the doors of the Lord's Temple and from the doorposts he had overlaid with gold, and he gave it all to the Assyrian king. [17] Nevertheless the king of Assyria sent his commander in chief, his field commander, and his personal representative from Lachish with a huge army to confront King Hezekiah in Jerusalem.”*

... so Hezekiah's solution didn't address nor cure their real problem!
... how sad when God ready and willing to help!

2. The king chose a man made solution when God had already made a **gracious promise** to them.

... it is a standing promise of God for His people.

Isaiah 30:15-19 (NLT) ... *“The Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says, ‘Only in returning to me and waiting for me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength. But you would have none of it. [16] You said, ‘No, we will get our help from Egypt. They will give us swift horses for riding into battle.’ But the only*

swiftness you are going to see is the swiftness of your enemies chasing you! [17] One of them will chase a thousand of you. Five of them will make all of you flee. You will be left like a lonely flagpole on a distant mountaintop.'

[18] **But the Lord still waits for you to come to him so he can show you his love and compassion. For the Lord is a faithful God. Blessed are those who wait for him to help them.**

[19] O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. **He will be gracious if you ask for help.** He will respond instantly to the sound of your cries.

Praise God ... Scripture records that there were a few devout followers of God that prayed and lived out their trust in the Lord.

Isaiah 33:2 (NLT) ... "But Lord, be merciful to us, for we have waited for you. Be our strength each day and our salvation in times of trouble."

Friends ... it is imperative that we learn to put our trust in the Lord during our life storms. Especially in times of uncertainty! We don't have to understand everything nor have all the answers, but we must know God and we must call out to our God for His help.

Proverbs 3:5-9 (NLT) ... "**Trust in the Lord** with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. [6] Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths. [7] Don't be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, **fear the Lord** and turn your back on evil.

[8] Then you will gain renewed health and vitality.

[9] **Honor the Lord** ...!"

These are difficult days that require us to go to the right place with our questions ... to find the right answers to our real problem ...

We don't have to make the mistakes that others have made before us!

Hezekiah did a very foolish thing when he took what belonged to God (God's Temple Treasures) and tried to use them to bribe Sennacherib. Truth is ... we all make bad choices! But God wants to forgive us!

... and He will hear us when we cry out to Him in repentance and when we call to Him for help.

Isaiah 33:6 (NLT) ... "In that day he will be your sure foundation, providing a rich store of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge. The **fear of the Lord** is the key to this treasure."

Dr. Rob Zinn ... **Unbelief looks to human resources for help, but faith looks to God. If we keep our focus on God, we won't be disappointed.**

So let me encourage you to go to God **first** and trust Him for all that you need with all of your heart. Call on Him today in prayer!

Pastor Randy Green

Fear or Faith

Psalms 91:9-12

Psalm 118:24 (NCV) ... *“This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad today!”*

The psalmist is crediting God as the giver of this new day that we have been given. He is also reminding each of us that it is up to us as to what we do with our day. We can chose to live in fear or in faith. You can chose ... and you will chose.

For so many people around the world, this world right now has become a very scary place. Every time I turn on the TV someone is talking about the subject of fear in some way or another. Sadly, there are way too many people who are drowning in fear. And unfortunately, so much of the fear that we struggle with is linked to situations that we have absolutely no control over.

We have no control over the weather, what our children say or do, the stock market, what governments do or don't do, what others do, or the next pandemic disease that sweeps across our world.

I wish we could fix all of these problems. But we can't! We can't control so many of the things that cause us pain and fear. But each of us can control how we respond to the things that tempt us to live in fear!

Phil Roberts ... *I know that I am never promised release from the problems of life, but I am released from questioning or doubting God's love.*

1. When troubles come, you don't have to live in fear.

Q ... The big question is why not? ... especially when that seems to be what everyone else is doing!

1). You can make good decisions that will help keep you safe.

Proverbs 22:3-4 (NLT) ... *“A prudent person foresees the danger*

ahead and takes precautions; the simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences. [4] True humility and fear of the Lord lead to riches, honor, and long life.”

2). You can also trust God for what you have no control over.

Psalm 91:9-12 (NLT) ... *“If you make the Lord your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, [10] no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your dwelling. [11] For he orders his angels to protect you wherever you go. [12] They will hold you with their hands to keep you from striking your foot on a stone.”*

Romans 8:15 (NCV) ... *“The Spirit we received does not make us slaves again to fear; it makes us children of God. With that Spirit we cry out, ‘Father.’”*

2 Timothy 1:7 (NKJV) ... *“For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”*

If God does not give us a spirit of fear ... then who does? Satan does. He loves for us to live our lives in fear. He loves to see us in a panic.

1 Peter 5:8-9 (NLT) ... *“Be careful! Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour. [9] Take a firm stand against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your Christian brothers and sisters all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering you are.”*

2. So when trouble comes, God's Word says instead of living in fear, chose to life in faith.

Brent Thompson ... *How we respond to the attacks of Satan is critical as we mature in our relationship with the Lord. Responding in faith helps us to overcome our fears when we place all of our trust in Jesus.*

Think for a minute ... about how Satan works. He loves to twist God's Word to tempt us to fear. He is good at leaving out things that God has said or sometimes he will even add to God's Word.

That is what he tried to do when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. If he would do this to Jesus, I guarantee he will do it to me and you.

Matthew 4:5-7 (NLT) ... *Then the Devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, [6] and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He orders his angels to protect you. And they will hold you with their hands to keep you from striking your foot on a stone.' "*

[7] Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'Do not test the Lord your God.' "

Satan was doing his best to twist God's Word around so that he could cause Jesus to stumble. Well guess what ... he loves to try that same thing on us. He loves to see us stumble over truth.

There was a story written in the **Reader's Digest** by **John Bradshaw** where he tells about a lady who went on a mule ride through a canyon. It was a steep ride ... she could see the cliffs and the rocks that plummeted down into the valley ... and she was afraid. The woman managed to cover her fear until she saw one of the guides nod to her mule as he said to another guide, "*Hey, I thought we retired old Stumblefoot.*" That's when she broke down in fear. You see ... up to that point ... she had been feebly putting her trust in old Stumblefoot, but he wasn't that trustworthy.

Isn't that what we do? We spend so much of our time listening to what everybody has to say about how we ought to fix our problem or handle

our situation. Sometimes Satan's suggestions even sound good to us. They can sound so spiritual when in fact they are always empty of divine truth.

Friends, it is absolutely critical that we be spiritually mature enough to be able to discern God's truth from Satan's lies and suggestions.

All the more reason for us to daily spend time in the Word of God.

... we need to ***meditate*** on the Word of God filling our minds with truth ...

... we need to ***memorize*** the Word of God filling our hearts with His precious promises ...

... we also need to take His Word and ***mobilize*** it's truth into our world so that the lost can know our God.

Let me encourage you when you are tempted to be fearful to respond instead in faith to our God and trust Jesus to provide and protect us.

Dear Father, today I chose to trust you in the midst of my storm. Please help me to love my life faithfully trusting you as I seek to bring glory to your name and goodness to your world.

Pastor Randy Green

The Lord My Help

Psalms 94:16-19

For at least the last two weeks, most of us have been practicing what is now called social distancing. I never liked the idea from the beginning even though I know it is the best thing we can do to fight the viral enemy we are all facing. The first week I did ok keeping my distance. But getting through the second week was hard and stressful. Everyone I have talked to feels the same way. We are just not meant to be alone. Even God's Word tells us that. God said in **Genesis 2:18** ... *"It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him."*

God created us for relationships. We are social beings. We are at our best when we are together with others. There are just so many benefits that come with relationships.

How many times have you tried to do something by yourself and thought ... I sure wish I had someone who could help me. Everyone of us knows what it is like to need someone's help. We can't build a healthy life for ourselves without developing relationships with others who can be there for us and help us in our times of need.

But you know, people are not the only ones you need to have a relationship with. We all need to relate to God on a daily basis.

Brent Thompson ... *As we focus on building healthy relationships with other believers, we must remember to base the health of our earthly relationships on the health of our heavenly relationship with our Lord.*

That is so true and especially in times like these when we can't get together for the fellowship and fun that we love to have. Someone said to me this past week that when we finally get the ok to get back together ... we're going to have a really big party at the church. And I am sure we will and we will have a great time catching up with each other.

But until then, I want to encourage you to spend your extra time working

on your relationship with your best friend Jesus. He alone is our divine helper and the source of all of our strength. He created us and every day He provides for us the things we need. Jesus is the only one who can sustain us in our shortcomings with His infinite grace and mercy. As children of God, we should be grateful recipients of His abundant blessings. Paul writes in **Ephesians 2:4-5 (NLT)** ... *"But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so very much, [5] that even while we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's special favor that you have been saved!)"* No one will ever treat you with grace and mercy like Jesus does.

Psalms 94:16-19 (NLT) ... *"Who will protect me from the wicked? Who will stand up for me against evildoers? [17] Unless the Lord had helped me, I would soon have died. [18] I cried out, 'I'm slipping!' and your unfailing love, O Lord, supported me. [19] When doubts filled my mind, your comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer."*

The psalmist declares that his greatest Helper is the Lord. He is the one who picks him up and holds him and provides for his safety. As a child of God, you must never forget that you are being held in the Lord's powerful grip and that you are safe and secure for all eternity. Jesus has your back! No one can keep and protect you like the Lord.

Jesus is our divine protection and He is our sure hope! He cares for you like no other! He knows how to encourage and comfort you in the midst of your worst life storms. He can wipe away your tears and fears.

1 Peter 5:6-9 (NLT) ... *"So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and in his good time he will honor you. [7] Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about what happens to you. [8] Be careful! Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour. [9] Take a firm stand against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your Christian brothers and sisters all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering you are."*

Look far and wide ... and you will never find a friend who can keep you safe and secure like Jesus. And no one will ever give to you the comfort and peace that He alone can provide. So look to Jesus in these

difficult days. For the Lord wants to be your great help! He wants to be your divine Helper!

sticks closer than a brother. Thank you for caring about me the way You do. I love and appreciate You Lord. In the precious name of Jesus, amen.

Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us our very best friend in Jesus Christ. Lord, teach me in days like these that you are a friend that truly

Hidden in Plain Sight

Psalm 139:7-12

Please tell me I'm not the only one constantly losing stuff. I forget where I put something only to replace it and have two of the same one. Sadly, sometimes I will lose both of them. One thing that helps prevent this is putting stuff where it belongs. In my case, however, I sometimes forget where I put it so I wouldn't lose it.

One time I had a professor who had three pairs of glasses resting on top of his head. The first pair were the ones he slid up out of the way when he didn't need him. The other two were spares that he put on because he couldn't find the first, then the second, pair.

David, in two previous psalms, had acknowledged the Lord as his hiding place.

Psalm 32:7- *You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.*

Psalm 119:114- *You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word*

In this case, however, David was acknowledging that while he could hide IN God, he could never hide FROM God.

Psalm 139:7-12- *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*

*If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

David is saying something that would have served that professor well, even if it seems like God is missing, He is right there with you.

David wrote this psalm as an acknowledgement that he cannot hide from God; it is a psalm of comfort, but also of confession. He is admitting to God that he knows that God always knows where he is and always sees what he does. In both cases, however, it is a comfort to him. We know this because of how David ends the psalm:

Psalm 139:23-24- *Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Several times throughout Scripture, from the very beginnings of Israel (**Deut. 4**) to the early church (**Heb. 13**) God promises to stick with us. He uses the term "I

will never leave you nor forsake you." Some versions say "I will never leave you or abandon you."

God is very specific in how He will be with us. By never leaving us, He promises his eternal presence. He will be right there with us, no matter what. By never abandoning us, He promises His eternal faithfulness.

The combination of never leaving and never forsaking means that God will always be in the foxhole with us, but it also means He is fighting alongside us. He is working to fight our battles.

We have all known people (and, honestly, we have all been the person) who have been WITH us, but have abandoned us in a time of need. They may remain silent when they should have spoken up as they were physically by our side, or they could have acted rather than to see how things would play out in a time of trouble.

God promises both to BE there always and to MOVE always. When we need Him most, He acts on our behalf. He is trustworthy. He is faithful. He is both a shield AND a sword. He protects us but He also fights for us.

Right now there is a lot of uncertainty and anxiety. Where is God in all this? Why doesn't He do something? How could He allow this to happen? Any number of questions arise in a time of crisis.

This can be a time of crushing loneliness as even our friends, family, and pastors cannot come and go

physically into our presence because they or we might become infected and cause harm to someone else.

Rest assured, however, that God is there. He is RIGHT there. He is closer than your touch, more comforting than an embrace by a friend, has no risk of infecting or being infected, knows the exact level of your concern, AND is also actively moving to create a solution and a provision for a global problem.

The same God who is comforting and healing in Asia and Europe, the same God who is stirring the hearts and minds of politicians and scientists, the same God who is providing for business owners and health care providers, is living IN you and giving you exactly what you need.

When there is nothing else we can do but be alone and wash our hands, let us rest in the assurance of the ever-faithful, ever present God of All Things.

"Lord Jesus, thank You for Your faithfulness to me. Not just Your goodness, but that You won't abandon me. Thank You that even though You know everything about me, You won't leave me. You won't leave me here alone to fret and worry. Please grant me peace in my anxiety. Grant me opportunities to serve my neighbors even if it is nothing more than a phone call and a listening ear. Use this time to boost my faith so that I can say to everyone I meet, 'Look what the Lord has done!' Receive all the glory from what You do. I love you, Jesus. Amen."

Pastor Art Stafford

Spring Cleaning

1 John 2:15-17

I know I'm not the only one.

I can hear lawnmowers, leaf blowers and mulch-delivering trucks in my neighborhood. I see the dumpsters filling up every time I go to the dump. While the restaurants are empty, Lowe's and Home Depot are full.

Everyone is doing spring cleaning.

People do spring cleaning every year. Leaves are blooming, it's time to feed the lawn and to give it a first cut of the season, prune some limbs, and give the outside of the house a wash. Inside we have work to do, too. The difference is, for many of us, we have time to do it this year, unlike most years.

We're still busy with all the work we've always had, but at the same time, we're now at home to do it. We have to look at the walls and floors and lights in the light of day instead of just in the evening when we're exhausted from work. And the need to clean is obvious.

The question is this: Are you taking advantage of your current circumstance to do some spring cleaning?

1 John 2:15-17-- *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world--the lust of the flesh,*

the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

John addresses "the world" in three categories: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Matthew Henry says, "This love or lust is not appointed of God (he calls us from it), but it intrudes itself from the world; the world is a usurper of our affection."

In other words, the intrusion of worldly things work to replace our affection for God, with affection for our own appetites.

1. *Lust of the flesh* refers to our desire to humor the appetites of the body. It can refer to sinful pleasures or even an overindulgence in what would otherwise be seen as good. It is often translated as *luxury*.
2. *Lust of the eyes* connotes a desire for the things we see. Treasures and riches, the extravagant things we would love to have. It is a dissatisfaction for God's provision, and is covetousness.
3. *Pride of life* is the seeking of praise and applause, recognition for even simple, expected tasks. It is vain, glory-seeking and a pursuit of grandeur and honor and pomp.

It seems to me that right now is the prime time for our fleshly desires to get the best of us. As we've often heard the adage, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop", we find ourselves in a situation where "free time" was thrust upon us suddenly. For some it has become a break, for others a burden, for all a battleground.

Depending on your life circumstance and even the stage in life where you are, your challenges will be different from those of other people.

If you're retired, your social and volunteer opportunities may be suspended.

If you're employed, you may be working from home or be out of work for an unknown period of time.

If you're a student, your school may now be online or even canceled.

If you're a parent with children suddenly at home, your patience may be wearing thin.

If you have health concerns your anxiety may be at an all-time high.

Whoever you are and whatever your situation, now is a great time to do some spring cleaning.

Spend some time asking the Lord what it is that needs to be sifted through, destroyed, repacked or thrown away. Maybe you are bearing guilt for sins already forgiven. Get rid of that guilt once and for all, making room for grace.

Maybe your career path or educational path has suddenly been put on hold or taken a new direction. Open it up to new thinking, air it out and pack it in the bubble wrap of God's good design.

Maybe you are missing opportunities for more applause and victory at work or on your sports team. Trophies, bonuses, promotions, etc. Let your old thinking on those things go and consider re-labeling the boxes.

As a friend of mine was fond of saying, "We can rest in the knowledge that nothing happens in this world without it coming across God's desk first."

Even though we have been caught off-guard by this virus and its effects, God wasn't. No angel came to the throne room with a tremble in his voice, saying, "Bad news, Sir..."

Whatever it is you're working through and however you need to do it, now is the time for some spring cleaning.

Father God, I know you're not surprised by any of this, but I had plans. I trust that you're going to take care of me. When my mind starts to wander in idle times, prompt it to wander to You. Show me what I need to reconsider, unpack, throw out, and destroy. Help me repack my hopes, dreams and plans in a way that they align with yours. Give me what I need to focus on your leadership and not the leading of my own flesh. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Are We There Yet?

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 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.”

“Are we there yet...? How much farther?”

What parent hasn’t heard those words coming from the back seat of their mini-van, or, if you’re old enough to remember, their station wagon.

When our daughter was young she had her own little entertainment center back there; a 9" TV with a built in VCR! (I know... I’m telling my age here.) We would take vacations up to New England pretty much every summer and invariably at some point along the way we would get those questions:

“Are we there yet...?”

“No... not yet.”

How much farther...?”

About one “Jungle Book” and half a “Little Mermaid.”

Wouldn’t it be great if someone could tell us that this current pandemic situation would be over, that we’d be “there,” in about one “Jungle Book” and half a “Little Mermaid.”

Wouldn’t it be great if we had some realistic, reliable and understandable time frame that we could easily relate to?

Some of you may have seen the FaceBook post that went something like:

“2020 sure has been a crazy Leap Year:
February had 29 days,
March had 39 days, and
April had 359 days...”

Here we are at the end of April and although we are seeing some positive trends (Praise God!) no one can really give us a *realistic, reliable and understandable* time frame for when this will all be over, or even when we will even be able to meet together again in corporate worship.

At our “virtual” Leadership Team meeting this past week we talked a bit about what that may even look like. Needless to say, we are excitedly looking forward to that day. But obviously we are not “there” yet, and because of all of the unknowns it might be easy to become discouraged.

In this passage in 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul states:

“Therefore we do not lose heart...”

Like we always say; when you see a “therefore,” you need to see what it is “there for.”

In the preceding verse Paul makes the statement;

“All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”

Three things jumped out at me in this verse.

“All this is for your benefit,”

Wait a minute God... surely You're not saying "all this" is for our benefit...

And God said:

"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."

(Romans 8:28 NIV)

And then;

"...the grace that is reaching more and more people..."

We are hearing story after story of how the gospel message is being presented and shared in ways like never before. There are numerous testimonies of and from people who routinely do not attend church who are now tuning in to online services, devotionals and Bible studies.

That in itself should cause;

"...thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God."

One day, hopefully soon, we will all be able to join together in one place, at one time, in worship and fellowship - and thanksgiving! Sadly, we're not "there" yet.

But in reality, even when we get "there," we really won't be at our ultimate and eternal "there." All of the "there" that people are trying to get to, or get back to, is still only temporal.

"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."

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Are You Out of Your Mind?

Colossians 3:1-4

If you spend any amount of time watching TV or online it is not hard to see the resemblance to zombie movies. How many zombie movies show empty streets, people hiding in their homes and news footage of this horrible disease that has caused a global outbreak and resulting panic?

The answer? All of them.

All the zombie movies show that same footage that is meant to set the climate for the rise of a hero. When the zombie apocalypse arrives, ordinary men are forced to become heroes to save their families.

Granted, we're not in a zombie apocalypse, but all the news is focused on the results of COVID-19 around the world and in our local community. When did we know about it? Whose fault is it that we didn't know sooner? How are we supposed to respond? Where am I allowed to go and who am I allowed to see?

In our home we have narrowed the news down to a brief showing: one local broadcast and one national broadcast. The rest of the time the tv is usually off until our evening shows come on. Even that is weird, though, because journalists that are usually on set, are

broadcasting from their living rooms or kitchens. Even the entertainment shows are talking to celebrities about how they're handling the quarantine since no movies are being released and no shows being made.

So, are you out of your mind yet?

Maybe that's the wrong way to ask it. Where does your mind go? Still unclear? Let's look at what Paul said to the Colossians and we'll go from there.

Col 3:1-4--*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

Paul had just spent some time correcting their theology and practice, reminding them not to be burdened by the requirement of men, but to rest in the faith that had saved them through the work of Christ. Go back and read at least chapter 2 to see how it flows into chapter 3.

He says that since you have been raised with Christ, focus on that. Focus on the things God has for you, not on earthly things. When he says "earthly things" he is not talking about regular, everyday things (since our spiritual practices should also govern the everyday), but he is talking about sin. He continues on in verse 5 and forward to specify what to do away with.

That said, where is your mind going while it is not distracted with your usual commitments and responsibilities, or your typical routine? Are you thankful that the Lord has provided more opportunity to focus on Him and what He wants for you? Or are you using this time to indulge in sinful passions?

The fact is that our sinful nature continues to have a strong pull, even when we have a strong new nature. Paul describes his battle in Romans 7:14-25 (take a moment to read it) and it fits all of us, not just Paul.

Paul is telling the Colossians to feed their new nature so that it grows strong, and not to indulge the sinful nature, which can easily overtake them. The fact is, unless the mind is tied to something, it's going to wander. Usually when we are busy with responsibilities we can keep our mind from wandering so easily, but if we spend less time focusing on a task at hand, we can easily drift off into some negative thinking, fear, worry, etc. If we feed it with a 24-hour news cycle each day, it can make it worse.

"How do I focus on things above, then?" you may ask.

1. Limit your anxious inputs. If something makes you feel negative, angry, afraid, tense, etc., give it limited access to your head. Instead of giving it the master suite, keep it to a porch visit.
2. Be intentional about spending time in Bible study and prayer. If daily devotions are new, it may feel like you're walking on wobbly legs, like a baby deer. That's okay. Like anything else, practice it well and it will feel more and more natural.

3. Find some positive inputs. Subscribe to good sermon podcasts. Adrian Rogers (*Love Worth Finding*) and James Merritt (*Touching Lives*) are my favorites. I like podcasts because I can feed my spirit while I'm doing other work (exercising, home repairs, yard work, driving, etc.). There are lots of good books, too. David Jeremiah is my favorite author.
4. Pray when it pops into your head. Just a couple of sentences when you're prompted. You can also set an alarm to remind you. For instance, Dare 2 Share asked us to set our alarm for 10:10 daily to pray for youth revival (D2S Live is October 10, or 10-10). If your friend's birthday is July 20, set an alarm for 7:20 to pray for him or her.

Setting our minds on things above is not especially difficult, but it does take intentionality. It won't just happen; we have to make it happen. It can become more natural, but it is a habit we have to form.

We are reminded in v4 that Christ is our life. Years ago there was a trend of "____ if life, the rest is details." You could put anything you want in there: baseball, fishing, etc. It helps to think, "Christ is life, the rest is details."

Lord, thank you that you call me to focus on you. You are not a source of anxiety, but of comfort; not turmoil, but peace. Help me to rest in you and to focus on things above. Show me where I should go to help me reshape my thinking on godly things. Most of all, draw me more to see that it is Christ who is my life. Amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Finding Peace In Your Storm!

Colossians 3:14-16

Life storms come in all sizes and shapes. No two storms are alike. No Christian is immune to life storms. All storms, in whatever form they materialize, create anxiety. Anxiety is the opposite of peace. When you are overwhelmed with anxiety, it is very hard to find and live in peace. And that is troublesome because we all need to know how to live in peace.

Colossians 3:15b (NLT) ...“Let the *peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts.*”

Well, how do you do that? How do you find peace in the midst of whatever storm you are going through?

Can you remember back to when you were in school and your teacher gave you a new homework assignment and you knew *what* she wanted you to do but you *didn't* know just how to do it? That use to happen with me all the time in my math classes. I knew what to do, but all too often I didn't have a clue about how to do it. Well, there is a difference between knowing what to do and knowing how to do it!

Paul says ... when the storms come, let God's peace rule in your hearts. I know what peace looks like. But I don't always know how to experience it when I am going through a life storm. So how do you find and activate peace in your life? How do you do that in the middle of a viral pandemic when we can't even meet as a church?

Colossians 3:14-15 (NLT) ...“And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony. [15] And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful.”

Throughout Scripture, as Christians we are told to live in unity. Unity

can mean many things. Paul's use of the word in this passage means living together in perfect harmony. It is the practice of being together and living in peace and harmony. There are certainly challenges to those instructions when you can't come together as an church family. Social distancing makes unity hard. So what do you do? Paul shares some thoughts that can help us. In fact, when it comes to living in unity as a church, Paul addresses the what and the how.

First, Paul talks about what we are suppose to do even through the storms. He says, *let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your heart* (15). That is *what* we are suppose to do!

How we do that is found in the preceding verse. Verse 14 says ... *the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony.*

Paul wants us to understand that God's love is the key to letting the peace of God rule in our lives, and God's peace is what brings us together in unity. They all work together.

So just what does God's love look like? Paul wrote a whole chapter about God's love in his letter to the Corinthian Church. He certainly describes love differently from the world's definition.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NLT) ...“Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud [5] or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. [6] It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. [7] Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.”

Remember that love is not just something that God does. Love is a part of His divine character. God is love. Because He first loved us, we also can love Him and others as well.

Remember also that you can live with the peace of Christ ruling in your life when you are willing to put on the love of God.

I confess to you that I am having a hard time loving people the way I am accustomed to with the restrictions of social distancing. But there are

ways to love like Christ loves us. I have gone back to reading the gospels to see how Jesus loved people. He was always loving people by ministering to them in their need. I am also praying for God to show me ways that I can reach out to my neighbors with acts of kindness that reflect the love of Christ. That should be our goal and prayer.

Live your life in such a way that those who know you but don't know God, will come to know God because they know you.

Father, help us to find the peace we all need by drawing close to you and letting you teach us to love others like you love us. Thank you for loving us. Help us to love like you love. Amen!

Pastor Randy Green

Peace That Calms Any Storm!

Colossians 3:14:16

I have talked with several members of our church about how their Resurrection Sunday went and everyone seemed to have had a good day worshipping God together with their family at home. But everyone also said that it was very different! You know, we were taught to be team players when we went to Thailand on our international mission trips. They had every day planned out with things they wanted us to do. But things didn't always go as planned and we soon found out that things are very different in Thailand. They speak a different language. They eat different foods. They travel around the city in several very different ways. Their culture is also very different. Even the smells of Thailand are different. So our missionary encouraged each of us to be flexible when our plans had to be changed and to say ... ***My that is different!*** ... when we encountered difficult or troubling things.

Well, Easter was certainly different and we should all just say ... ***My that was different!*** ... and move forward. We are going to have to deal with different for a while and no one knows how long. We all need to endure well and learn to make the most of different. The apostle Paul would say ...

Colossians 3:14-15 (NCV) ... *“Do all these things; but most important, love each other. Love is what holds you all together in perfect unity. [15] Let the peace that Christ gives control your thinking, because you were all called together in one body to have peace. Always be thankful.”*

Let me encourage you with some thoughts from Paul that can help you do different successfully.

1. (14) First, make sure that the love of Christ continues to **bind** us together as a church.

... Do all these things; but most important, love each other. Love is

what holds you all together in perfect unity.

Love is what unites us as God's people. Now more than ever, we need to be **loving** each other so that we can stay together as His church even when we cannot assemble and worship. This will pass but for now we must accept it as different and make the most of our situation.

2. (15a) Also make sure that the peace of Christ **rules** in your hearts.

... Let the peace that Christ gives control your thinking, because you were all called together in one body to have peace. Always be thankful.

Peace! You can't find peace in a pill bottle. Not in a bottle of wine either. It is not on the shelf of your grocery store. You can't buy it or inherit it from your parents. Not everyone enjoys peace ... but peace is something that we all want and need. Search for it and you will learn that peace is not the absence of problems, but instead it is an awareness of the presence of Jesus. He is the Peacemaker. Jesus is the Peace Giver. He is the Prince of Peace.

John 14:27 (NLT) ... ***“I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid.”***

To have peace with God, you must have a relationship with His Son Jesus Christ. His peace then becomes not only a precious gift, but a helpful guide through your life and life storms.

John 16:32-33 (NLT) ... ***“But the time is coming—in fact, it is already here—when you will be scattered, each one going his own way, leaving me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. [33] I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”***

Please make note of several important points about the peace that Jesus has promised each of us who know and trust Him:

1. The peace Jesus offers is an **available** peace.

Dressed Right

Colossians 3:12

"You'll never guess who I went to dinner with last night."

That's how Mel greeted me when he came in to work.

"Who?" I asked.

Mel's fiancée was a lifelong friend with a famous actress who was back in town making a movie and they had all gone to dinner together at a nice restaurant. The restaurant required a jacket and tie for the men and one of the actors had to borrow one. Because he was a comedian he decided to choose a blazer that was much too big and tied the tie wrong on purpose. The restaurant couldn't say anything about it because technically he was following dress code.

Lots of places have dress codes. Schools, workplaces, clubs and even gyms have restrictions on what you are allowed and not allowed to wear.

Paul told the church at Colossae that they should follow a dress code as well.

Colossians 3:12-- *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*

Paul directs us to clothe ourselves in these traits, but that is in a list of images we are given. Clothing ourselves

paints the picture of choosing an outfit, accessorizing it, fixing ourselves up and putting it on for the occasion of leaving the house, dressed appropriately for an occasion.

In the first part of chapter 3, Paul gives these directions:

Set your hearts
Set your minds
Put to death
Rid yourselves
Clothe yourselves
Bear with
Forgive
Put on
Let rule
Let dwell
Do all

In verses 9-12 he paints a picture of actively taking off our old way of doing things and putting on a new way. It is a conscious action. He is saying that because we are chosen by God and have been made holy, we are to consciously accessorize with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

It's important to note that we are told to do it. That means that we have the choice. These are not things that will suddenly bubble up in us, but are instead actions and attitudes we have to cultivate.

How do we become compassionate? By practicing compassion when the opportunities present themselves.

How do we become kind? By choosing to be kind and by displaying kindness when we would much rather respond selfishly or out of anger.

How do we become humble? By giving God the glory for all things and acknowledging that what we have is to be used to point others to Him.

How do we become gentle? By making it a point to resist our initial instinct to respond in harshness and to instead respond in an understanding way.

How do we become patient? By going through hardships and looking to God as our source of strength and endurance.

In other words, when we are directed to clothe ourselves in these character traits we need to come to grips with the reality that it takes time and effort to do.

Sometimes I still get surprised at how long it takes me to get ready to go somewhere when I'm dressing up. Of course I don't have to wash and style my hair, but I do have to trim it. And I have to trim my beard. I have to shower and shave and brush my teeth.

I will choose my shirt and tie to go with my suit and then I notice it needs to be ironed, so I will wait for the iron to heat up and then I'll iron my shirt. I'll notice a scratch on my shoes so I'll polish them.

When we are clothing ourselves as Paul described, we do not need to be under the impression that we can just

toss these things on like we put on our pajamas or sweat pants when we get home from work. We need to carefully and consistently check ourselves in the mirror of God's Word. We need to ask the Holy Spirit, "How do I look?"

Right now we all have new opportunities to put on compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience each day, with the intent of going out and ministering to those in our circle.

What do you say? Are you dressed right?

"Lord Jesus, thank you for even giving me the opportunity to be changed. Thank you that you still work with me to remove my old language, attitudes, and struggles, and to help me grow in compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience. Please help me see myself in the mirror as I truly am. Help me accessorize the way I need to so that I can show others who You are and point them to you. Dress me up, Lord, and take me out. Amen."

Pastor Art Stafford

Comforted to Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

It's no accident that those who make the best addiction counselors are those with a history of addiction. Those who have the greatest heart for the abused are those who have faced abuse. Those who are the most effective at comforting the grieving are those who have grieved deeply.

While in the middle of a hardship we have a tendency to ask God, "Why?" Why do we suffer? Why do we face hardships? Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians tells us that God comforts us so we can comfort others.

2 Cor 1:3-4-- *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*

While we may not know exactly why we face the hardships we do, we are told that God comforts us because of his compassion for us. We are told that he comforts us in ALL our troubles, not some, not a few, not just specific ones, but ALL.

When you go through a hard time and need comfort, who or what do you turn to? Some people turn to vices. HALTS is an acronym that describes when we mostly turn to our vices: when we are *hungry, angry, lonely, tired or stressed*. These are our weakest points, the times we are most vulnerable to fall.

When we recognize that God is the "Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" he becomes another option for us to lean on, a better option. In fact, the best option. When we return to our vices for comfort we also bring the consequences of those choices. When we rest in God as our comfort our lives takes a different turn and our perspective on suffering is different. We may still ask why, but we can also learn to rest in the answer, whatever it is, or the lack of it.

But mostly we become less concerned with why things happen to us and instead wonder what we can do with the experience of the hardship. Just as addiction counselors can look back on their behaviors and choices in submitting to their addiction, and recognize the foolishness of it, they do not hide it. Instead once they break free they, too, gain a compassionate perspective for those who struggle with the same thing.

In our suffering we often become less judgmental. We come to recognize that some of our hardship comes from outside and is not based entirely on our own choices. When we see that we know that the same case can be made for others. On the other side we come to be less concerned with how someone got into the situation

they are in, and instead sympathize with them for the fact that they are in it at all.

In going through the masters degree program for counseling and hearing how people got into counseling as a career, what I heard over and over again is that they each had a tragic story and wanted to help others going through hard times. In most cases they were seeking certification to do a niche practice, or a private practice which specializes in a certain population (abuse survivors, war veterans, grief and loss, affair recovery, etc). As they had gone through a specific form of suffering, they developed a sympathy for others going through the same thing and commit their lives to helping others.

Make no mistake, however, that your own suffering does not need to match the suffering of those who need comfort. That fact that you have suffered at all prepares you to comfort others. Understand, however, that it is the comfort of God, the Father of compassion, whose comfort you are sharing with others.

As God comforts you in your suffering, embrace that comfort and rest in it. Let the comfort of God build in you a compassion that God can (and will) use to minister to others in their suffering. School and certifications, books and advice from friends cannot prepare you to be compassionate and comforting. Only suffering can do that.

One of the things suffering does is draws us closer to God, if we will look to him. As we draw close to him, we

begin to adopt his character (being transformed) and his perspective. If God is the God of all comfort and the Father of compassion, then we will become more compassionate and capable of comforting when we draw closer to God. And with the comfort he comforts us with, we can comfort others.

Once during Queen Victoria's reign, she heard that the wife of a common laborer had lost her baby. Having experienced deep sorrow herself, she felt moved to express her sympathy. So she called on the bereaved woman one day and spent some time with her. After she left, the neighbors asked what the queen had said. "Nothing," replied the grieving mother. "She simply put her hands on mine, and we silently wept together."

When we suffer, much of God's comfort comes simply from his presence with us. In the same way, we can be most comforting with our presence.

Father, thank you for your comfort to me in my times of hardship. While I know you teach me in my suffering, I also know that I am learning to sympathize with others. Give me a heart for the hurting that I can comfort them with the comfort you have given me. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Fooling Ourselves

1 Cor 3:18-20

So many experts!

So many people today with official-sounding titles and initials after their names and degrees from Ivy League schools, all telling us how this virus will spread or fade if only we will listen to what they are telling us to do.

If we go back to work and school and life too fast the virus will spread and people will die. If we wait too long businesses will close and the economy will stall and people will die.

We are given statistics and numbers, timelines and charts, graphics and videos and interviews filled with "wisdom" from people who don't know any more about the future than you do. Oddly enough, there is only one person who knows exactly how this is going to play out and everyone is working very hard to keep from asking for His insight.

Yeah, human wisdom.

Bad news for humans, for all the prophets of doom and all the miracle workers both: the death ratio for humanity is 1:1. For every person born, one person will die. Death has a 100% success rate, regardless of approval ratings.

But there is hope! Our hope is in Jesus Christ! But most of the world wants to look to everyone BUT Jesus.

Paul has something to say about that:

1 Cor 3:18-20-- *Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you things he is wise in this age, let him become a fool so that he can become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, since it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows that the reasonings of the wise are futile."*

In the Old Testament wisdom and foolishness are contrasted blatantly as a way to teach the people of Israel how to live. Wisdom is about following godly principles and being productive and generous. Foolishness is about following emotions and being short-sighted and living for pleasure.

Paul is not speaking to the Jewish people here, but rather to those raised in a Greek cultured where wisdom ruled supreme. Paul's statement above was, "People call you a fool for following Christ. Fine, be a fool so that you are open to receiving God's perspective. Forget everything you have heard about being wise growing up because you belong to Christ now and He will show you what real wisdom looks like."

Have you ever tried to talk faith with an intellectual? Generally it's not easy. I'm thankful for ministries like that of Rhavi Zacharias, who has studied philosophy for decades and has argued for the reality of God and the

supremacy of Christ in a way that makes intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals reconsider their own "wisdom."

But let's be honest. Our biggest problem is not that we think we're wise like philosophers. Instead we think we're wise as life managers. We want to run our own lives the way we think is best, often seeking advice from people who agree with us rather than those who will actually cause us to reconsider our decisions.

We've all seen movies where a king, political leader or CEO has people around them that simply praise their insight, their skill, even their appearance, bringing delight to their leader. If someone fails to do so, then they are fired or, even worse, beheaded.

The Word, however, calls us to make fools of ourselves so that we can hear from God and be changed. We believe the God of all things knows us by name and loves us. That's foolishness.

He demands a sacrifice, but supplied the sacrifice. And it was His Son. Kooky talk.

Wisdom is a good thing! You want to have a wise financial manager. You want a wise spouse or parent. You want to teach your children to be wise. You want to have a wise boss or wise employees or wise business partners. We want our leaders to be wise and we definitely want wise medical professionals caring for us.

When it comes to the things of God, however, that wisdom does not come simply from study and experience.

It comes from surrender. If we surrender to the will of the Lord, He will make us wise. According to **Proverbs 9:10**, true wisdom begins with fearing the Lord. Make a fool of yourself and gain some wisdom.

Lord, thank you that when no one else seems to know what's going on, You do. When everyone is blaming others for moving too fast or too slow, of pushing too hard or dragging their feet, You move just right. You are not surprised by how far the virus has spread or who it has touched. You know how crazy we are from being stuck at home and how to make the most of it. We know that wisdom comes from You. Help me to make a fool of myself so that I trust You for wisdom instead of faulty leaders. Give me the discernment I need to follow your instruction and to surrender to you. Amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Serving With Christ

Matthew 9:35-38

In my message this past Sunday ... I asked the question ... **What percentage of the world's attention does God have right now?**

It should be our prayer that people around the world are thinking about God and seek Him for guidance and help. He is certainly our greatest source of help and comfort. Now one can do for you what God can do! God promises that if we seek Him, He will allow us to experience His divine supply and mercy!

Isaiah 55:6-7 (NLT) ... "Seek the Lord while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near. [7] Let the people turn from their wicked deeds. Let them banish from their minds the very thought of doing wrong! Let them turn to the Lord that he may have mercy on them. Yes, turn to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

What I want to encourage you to think about ... is how does God want to be seen in this moment? What is the vehicle that God wants to use to reveal Himself to hurting people? I believe that the greatest manifestation of our Lord in our day will be seen through the Church. We are the church. **He will be seen in us ...**

... as we care for and love each other in the body of Christ ...
... as we reach out and do acts of kindness for our neighbors and friends ...
... as we hold fast to our faith and make the most of every opportunity to explain our faith and trust in the Lord with those around us that are searching for hope and answers.

We do need to be safe and careful. But we also need to be creative in how we reach out and share the love of Christ. Even though we are limited in our physical contact with others ... there are still ways that we can touch the lives of people. So be creative and think about others. And prepare yourself for when we are able to socially interact with each other again. Make ready. Pray now and make

ready for the ministry opportunities that God is opening up. Church ... don't miss this great opportunity!

Matthew 9:35-38 (NLT) ... "Jesus traveled through all the cities and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And wherever he went, he healed people of every sort of disease and illness. [36] He felt great pity for the crowds that came, because their problems were so great and they didn't know where to go for help. They were like sheep without a shepherd. [37] He said to his disciples, 'The harvest is so great, but the workers are so few. [38] So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send out more workers for his fields.'"

Just a few thoughts to keep in mind when it comes to reaching out and sharing our faith with people who need to come to Christ and be saved.

1. Don't forget that the harvest of souls belongs to the **Lord**.

... neither you nor I can save a lost soul ... but there is no lost soul that the Lord can't save! God wants to use each of us as a conduit of His grace and He gives us permission to gossip about the gospel. That's right ... you can talk about Jesus all you want to! Please do! You talk and God will do the saving!

2. God works supernaturally to empower His **church** in the great endeavor of reaching the lost.

... that is why today's Scripture commands us to pray for others to come alongside us to go out and spread the Good News that Jesus saves. God will hear our prayers and raise up a army of witnesses to love and proclaim His message of redemption.

Fact: ... More people are hearing the truth about spiritual matters in the middle of this terrible viral storm ... than have in a long, long time. God has set the stage for us to shine and share!

3. This is not a time for us to depend on others to do our job. God wants to use each of **us**. He has opportunities customized just for

you.

... there are people that you can reach that no one else can!

Not to long ago, there was a survey done that determined that approximately 96% of the people born since 1970 do **not** have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Mike Whitson ... *That is only four percentage points away from having a pagan generation in America.*

Friends, this may be our last ... best opportunity to turn things around

spiritually in our country! Please pray that many of our Christian brothers and sisters will join us in sharing Christ with the dark and empty world that we live in! And by the way ... you don't have to pray asking God if He wants you to be involved. No need to pray about what you already know you should be doing. Just do it!

Farther, open our eyes to those you have ready to hear the story of Your Son Jesus and the difference He has made in our lives. Thank you for including us in Your great work of grace and mercy.

Pastor Randy Green

No Matter What

Phil. 1:27-28

"No matter what." That's a common phrase that takes form in several terms:

"For better or for worse, in sickness and in health..."

"No man left behind"

"Whatever happens I'll be there."

When we say "no matter what" we are acknowledging a couple of things:

1. We don't know what the future holds
2. We can get through it

When writing to the Philippians Paul talked about his own hardships, suffering and imprisonment and that however God chose to work His people needed to continue on.

Phi 1:27-28 NIV-- *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved--and that by God.*

Have you ever thought about the fact that your courageous response to opposition actually serves as evidence to your opponents that you will be saved by God?

Probably not. I'd never thought of that. I've read this passage before, studied it, even taught on it, but for whatever reason (probably the deep riches of Scripture) this is the first time it has stood out to me. What Paul says is, no matter what, behave in a godly manner, side by side as followers of Christ. As we move forward in the work of expanding the kingdom, unafraid, our opponents will get the sense that they can't win.

Everywhere I go in Hampton Roads I see little spray-painted signs (and now even car magnets) that say, "No matter what trust God."

Very simple, but not very easy. We find it easy to trust God when our health is secure or our job is intact or our family is together. But throw any kind of wrench in there and we can lose faith pretty easily. We immediately look for reasons (why me?) and then jump to practical solutions.

The question becomes, what is "a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ?" Well, doesn't Christ first call us to trust Him, to believe that what He says is true? Of course He does. It is important to become aware of the promises God makes in Scripture. If we are unfamiliar with His work and words how can we trust Him?

Our confidence to say "no matter what" has to come from a place of trust. I'm reminded of the story of a young woman, an only child, whose parents loved her very much. They were always there for her no matter what she went through. This young woman fell in love and got engaged. Her parents and his parents had reminded them that marriage was for life. It would be hard, but they would have to learn how to face their problems together.

It wasn't long before the young bride called her mother one night. Tears rolled down the mother's cheeks as her daughter wept into the phone about their first fight. "I'm not sure I can stay here with him," she said.

"What do you want me to do?" her mother asked.

"I want to come home."

Her mother quietly said, "You are home," and gently hung up the phone.

That young bride had her first taste of "no matter what." She needed to be reminded of the vow she took when she was looking to go back to her old life. It was no accident that Paul used the term "whatever happens" when directing the Philippians to behave in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. The results, he said, would be that their courageous response to opposition and hardship would serve as evidence that God was going to save them.

Then in **verse 29** he says, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him." Paul knew exactly who he was writing to. And the Lord knew that those words would be for all generations following.

So here we are, 2000 years later, being reminded that we are to behave in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, no matter what. How are you doing with that?

Personally I find my temper being a little short right now. My schedule is wacky, my routine is shot and most of my stress relievers have been taken away. Maybe you know exactly what I'm talking about. Or maybe you don't. No matter what, though, people are watching our responses to what's going on. What do they see?

"Lord, thank You for Paul's letter to the Philippians. I may not be in chains, but sometimes I don't feel as free as I would like. I know people are watching me and I need to control myself and display godly character. As people see me, let them see You. Give me the grace I need to trust You and to display that grace to others. Help me to draw others to you by my faith and faithfulness for Your glory. Amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Peace

Col. 3:15

Everything is weird right now. As I spend more time trapped in my home, the days seem to be getting longer. No matter how much I have to do, for the first time in as long as I can remember, I actually have plenty of time to do it.

Motivation is another issue.

Although there is plenty to do and plenty of time to do it, I don't like having my options removed. It drives me crazy staying in the house when I'm used to being at work and running errands. All our appointments have been canceled, the kids are home from school, church has to be done by video and my patience seems to be running on low.

Or maybe it's my longsuffering.

I had a pastor once who said patience is for handling situations, longsuffering is for handling people.

The truth is, in my case I'm running short on both. What I really need is peace.

Col.3:15-- *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.*

In writing this letter to the church at Colossae Paul is writing to remind them of how they ought to live as believers and in this portion of the letter, how to respond to each other during times of disagreement and correction specifically.

It's interesting that he uses the term "Let the peace of Christ *rule* in your hearts." It gives the image that your heart (the core of who you are) is a throne. Who sits on that throne? Looking at your actions and attitude, who do you see ruling in your heart?

Honestly, in my case, sometimes it isn't the peace of Christ. It's the irritation of Art. I'm not overly worried about whether my family or I will get sick, so that piece of peace is in place. This will pass and the Lord is at work.

I recognize, however, that the peace of Christ also means there should be inner tranquility regardless of circumstances. Our hearts need to be trained to recognize and submit to it, and right now, for any number of reasons we may not be doing very well.

We may be worried about how quickly and how far COVID-19 is spreading.

We may be worried about when we can go back to work.

We may be worried about picking up the virus and bringing it home after going out.

We may be worried about any number of things, but maybe we should be less worried about things we can't control and more worried about the thing we can: gaining more peace.

As the expert opinions and recommendations change daily we may find ourselves wondering if and when everything will get back to normal.

Maybe that's the problem: we're itching for normal.

But maybe "normal" has been our problem all along. Maybe as long as things are normal we don't need peace, at least the peace of Christ. Or it could be that normal has been having so little peace of Christ that when things went awry we didn't know how to access it.

While we have the time to pray or while we are praying anyway, let us pray for our own peace. Now is the time to pray that we would know the peace of Christ.

Someone once said, "Peace that Jesus gives is not the absence of trouble, but is rather the confidence that He is there with you always."

Someone else said, "Safety consists not in the absence of danger but in the presence of God."

Can I encourage you to seek the peace of Christ? Paul greets each church he writes to with a greeting of peace from God. It is clear that the Lord wants every believer to experience the peace of Christ. "Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart" is a statement of allowance. In other

words, the natural place of peace is on the throne of a believer's heart. The problem is that we so often try to overthrow that peace because it doesn't feel "normal."

But it can. It can feel normal. IF we make it a point of letting the peace rule.

"Aren't you worried about this virus?"

"Surprisingly, no. I know the Lord is taking care of it."

"Aren't your kids driving you crazy?"

"It takes some adjustment, but I'm glad I get to spend some time with them right now."

Peace may feel strange, but it can become your new normal.

Thank you, Lord, that you want peace for me. I know that I tend to get anxious, but I need the peace of Christ. Give me what I need to allow the peace of Christ to rule in my heart. I trust you to take care of me. Amen."

Pastor Art Stafford

Productive Children

Philippians 1:9-11

Every parent should want their children to grow up and become productive citizens of society. Christian parents should want even more. They should want their kids to grow up to know God personally and to become godly people.

Proverbs 2:1-5 (NLT) ...*“My child, listen to me and treasure my instructions. [2] Tune your ears to wisdom, and concentrate on understanding. [3] Cry out for insight and understanding. [4] Search for them as you would for lost money or hidden treasure. [5] Then you will understand what it means to fear the Lord, and you will gain knowledge of God.”*

God also cares deeply for us. He is the One who takes the initiative to find us and save our lost soul.

Luke 19:10 (NCV) ...*“The Son of Man came to find lost people and save them.”*

Thank God! That's great news! We all need to be saved from ourselves. However, we sometimes forget that one of the primary reasons that God saves us is so that we might become fruitful and productive disciples.

... Yes, God saved us so we could make it into heaven ... but that is certainly not the only reason!
... He saved us so that the righteous character of Jesus Christ could be reproduced in each of us.

We are to live in this world without being caught up in the world. We are to live in this fleshly body but not be of the flesh. We are to shine for Jesus so that those living around us can see our good acts of ministry and then bring glory and praise to our Father. God certainly wants to use your life as a turning point for a lot of lost souls.

Paul clearly had come to understand that about his own life. That led him to pray a timeless prayer for Christians everywhere!

Philippians 1:9-11 (NLT) ...*“I pray that your love for each other will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in your knowledge and understanding. [10] For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until Christ returns. [11] May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—those good things that are produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God.”*

Four specific things were included in Paul's prayer for us:

1. That we would **learn** how to love God and each other more and more.
2. That we would **grow** in our spiritual knowledge and understanding.
3. That we would **know** the difference between good and bad and choose to do good.
4. That with Christ's help, we would **do** many good things that bring attention to God.

Jesus clearly saved us out of His grace and not our merit. His plan for our lives is that we walk in His ways and do good works while we wait for His return.

Tim Anderson ... *God is somewhat like a father who is raising a large family. He is pleased to have the family, and He is delighted we are members of it. But He is not satisfied with our only being in His family. He wants us to grow up to be good citizens. Spiritually speaking, He wants productive children who accomplish great works for His kingdom.*

Our big challenge today in the midst of this viral pandemic is to figure out how we can do good works at a time when we can't even be close to each other? ... it is a time when we have to rethink ministry and be creative. Here are some things we can all do:

... **We can** ...

- ... make good uses of electronic devices and contact each other.
- ... send cards and letters with words of encouragement.
- ... cut our neighbors grass.
- ... plants some extra plants in our gardens to share with others.
- ... invite our neighbors to visit our website and join us for Bible study and worship.
- ... stay connected with our church family.

... pray, pray, pray!
... trust God!

Please Lord Jesus, help me to know how I can serve you in your kingdom and the world I live in to impact those around me and bring glory to our Father above.

Pastor Randy

Shaping Disciples

Proverbs 27:17

Proverbs 27:17 (NLT) ... “As iron sharpens iron, a friend sharpens a friend.”

If you have a knife sharpening steel, you can sharpen all the knives in your house. Joyce loves for me to sharpen her knives in the kitchen. Well, in the same way, a godly friend can help you grow spiritually in your walk with the Lord. And that is what we all need to be doing for each other. We are called to be disciples and disciple makers.

Discipleship is the spiritual process that progressively brings Christians from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity so that they are then able to reproduce the process with someone else. Therefore, discipleship is not complete until the disciple becomes the disciple maker. The number one goal of a believer who chooses to be a true disciple is to bring all of life under the lordship of Jesus Christ and then help someone else to do the same. As disciples of the Lord, it is our great task to become a disciple and to make more disciples.

The big question for us to address right now ... is how can we do that when we are forced to practice social distancing? This is how I think that question needs to be answered:

First, you have to make up your mind as to whether you just want to impress people or do you want to make an eternal impact on their lives. There is a considerable difference. Do I want people to know me and think good about me or do I want them to know my God?

Charles Stanley ... *Jesus taught that we have a responsibility to influence those around us, not simply get them to like us. He wants to impact them through you, working through what you say, how you live, and your very presence to inspire them to rethink their lives, prompting them to change ... like “iron sharpens iron.” This will require a dynamic in your relationship with others that may not be easy or comfortable, but will mean a difference in eternity.*

It is certainly God’s will for our lives as believers to live life in such a way so as to encourage and lead the people around us to put their trust in the Lord.

Matthew 5:16 (NLT) ... “In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.”

Big Question ... How do I do that when I have to keep my distance from people right now?

1. Pray specifically for people by name on a regular basis. Make use of a prayer journal. Make notes on who you pray for and how God answers.
2. Share scripture verses that have impacted your life with others. Nothing shapes us like the Word of God. Scripture provides the authoritative, objective truth needed to govern your maturing process. It also gives the objective truth needed to govern your choices and decision making.
3. Invite the Holy Spirit to join you in the process of impacting people’s lives for Christ. We need Him to empower us to make a difference in people’s lives. **Ephesians 5:18b-20 (NLT) - “... let the Holy Spirit fill and control you. [19] Then you will sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, making music to the Lord in your hearts. [20] And you will always give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**
4. Help others when and where you can through the storms of life. God knows how to use our trials to reveal to us our strengths and weaknesses, so that we can tangibly see the areas in our life that still need work. Trials, though painful, are like a surgeon’s knife, always designed to make you better.

James 1:2-5 (NLT) ... “Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. [3] For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. [4] So

let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything. [5] If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you. He will not resent your asking.”

Lord, in these difficult days, help me to follow closely behind you as You lead me through life. And please use my life to make a kingdom difference in the lives of others. Shape my life and use me to shape others. In Jesus name, amen.

5. Realize that relationships are mission critical. You need them and so do others. God has designed relationships into the fabric of your life so that the spiritual passion for others can keep you spiritually hot and the discipleship process can then come full circle. Iron does sharpen iron. Friends do sharpen friends ... even when all we can do is talk over the phone or send emails to each other. Be safe and be creative in staying connected with each other. Phone a friend today.

Pastor Randy Green

Making Ready To Worship Him

Psalm 100

I am curious about what we have learned during our time of social distancing. I am also certain that everyone of us would answer that question differently. That is to be expected. I know what my heart tells me that I should be learning ... but have I really learned it yet?

Over the last few weeks as I have had conversations with fellow believers, I keep hearing a reoccurring theme: ... ***we have all learned just how much we miss coming together as God's people***. We love fellowship and so we miss seeing and talking to our believing friends and especially our church family. And don't get me wrong on this ... gathering together as a church is a very important thing to do! Unfortunately, like so many things ... we don't realize how important it really is until we can't do it!

Hebrews 10:25 (NCV) ... *"You should not stay away from the church meetings, as some are doing, but you should meet together and encourage each other. Do this even more as you see the day coming."*

Old saying: ... *Absence makes the heart grow fonder.*

Q ... So what should we be learning? ... What is God trying to teach us?

Honestly, what we all need to be learning is that life on earth is not about us. This is all supposed to be about **Him**. It's about knowing **God**. Friends ... that can be a very hard lesson to learn. I don't know about you, but way too often I get caught up in me! Me is my biggest problem when it comes to knowing God the way I should.

Psalm 100:1-5 (NLT) ... was written as a psalm of thanksgiving.

"Shout with joy to the Lord, O earth! [2] Worship the Lord with

gladness. Come before him, singing with joy. [3] Acknowledge that the Lord is God! He made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

[4] Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and bless his name. [5] For the Lord is good. His unfailing love continues forever, and his faithfulness continues to each generation."

Someone once said that the Bible is a "Him" book. Well, that is a very accurate statement. Likewise, Psalm 100 could be called a "Him" Psalm. Everything about this Psalm points to God. He alone is the primary subject of this beautiful passage of Scripture. It's all about God as it well should be!

We are called by God to know Him ... the LORD, Yahweh, who is our covenant God and to know that He is also our Elohim, our Creator. He has made us His people. We are and always will be His sheep. We are called to follow Him. We are to come before Him to thank Him and bless His holy name. Notice how the psalmist says we are to enter His gates ... with thanksgiving and praise for Him. The Hebrew word for praise is ... **tehillah** ... and it means ***to celebrate, to exalt, to laud someone who is praiseworthy***.

Can you think of anyone who is more worthy of praise than our God?

Psalm 139:13-16 (NLT) ... *"You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. [14] Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—and how well I know it. [15] You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. [16] You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed."*

Throughout the Psalms we are reminded that God is our Creator, our Shepherd and our Father. In Him alone do we find our meaning and purpose. We have so much to be thankful to God for.

Even Snoopy understands the need to be thankful! In one of the stories told about Snoopy, he is seen looking in the window of a family's home

on Thanksgiving Day. He sees the bountiful and delicious spread of food on their table and quickly begins to complain and grumble about only having dog food to eat. But then after giving it a little more thought ... he realizes and says to himself ... ***"It could be worse, I could have been born a turkey."***

Listen, Snoopy is not the only one who could have been born a turkey! Certainly, that perspective alone helps us to be thankful to God. But the psalmist actually gives us three more very good reasons in verse 5 for being thankful to God.

1. He reminds us that our God is **good** all the time!

2. His abundant **mercy** and unfailing **love** for us knows no end!

3. God's **truth**, **promises** and **faithfulness** will endure to all generations.

I hope and pray that our time of social distancing from each other has only helped us grow closer to God. May we all be thankful for all of His blessings and Lord, help us right now to make ready to come together to give You all the glory and praise you deserve!

Pastor Randy Green

Blessed To Be Grateful!

Psalm 107:8-9

Gabriel the angel said to young Mary ...

Luke 1:28-33 (NLT) ... “Gabriel appeared to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored woman! **The Lord is with you!**’ [29] Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. [30] ‘Don’t be frightened, Mary,’ the angel told her, ‘**for God has decided to bless you!**’ [31] **You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus.** [32] **He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.** [33] **And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!**”

A few days later, Elizabeth said to Mary ...

Luke 1:42-45 (NLT) ... “Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, ‘**You are blessed by God above all other women, and your child is blessed.**’ [43] **What an honor this is, that the mother of my Lord should visit me!** [44] **When you came in and greeted me, my baby jumped for joy the instant I heard your voice!** [45] **You are blessed, because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.**”

Being so blessed, Mary broke out in a joyful song

Luke 1:46-50 (NLT) ... “Mary responded, ‘Oh, how I praise the Lord. [47] How I rejoice in God my Savior! [48] For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation will call me **blessed**. [49] For he, the Mighty One, is holy, and he has done great things for me. [50] His mercy goes on from generation to generation, to all who fear him.’”

Psalm 107:1-9 (NLT) ... “Give thanks to the Lord, for **he is good!** His faithful love endures forever. [2] Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out! **Tell others he has saved you** from your enemies. [3] For he has gathered the exiles from many lands, from east and west, from north and south. [4] Some wandered in the desert, lost

and homeless. [5] Hungry and thirsty, they nearly died. [6] ‘Lord, help!’ they cried in their trouble, and he rescued them from their distress. [7] He led them straight to safety, to a city where they could live. [8] Let them praise the Lord for **his great love** and for all his wonderful deeds to them. [9] For **he satisfies** the thirsty and **fills** the hungry with good things.”

We are now moving into our fourth week of staying home and not being able to have contact with those we love and care about. Being socially restricted is hard and anything but pleasant. Some like it, but the vast majority of us don’t. But even when I can’t do what I normally do or want to do ... I still have so much to be thankful for and honestly ... I really have no reason to complain.

... but too often that is what I find myself doing ... complaining!
... it is always easy to complain.
... it’s like it comes natural.
... you really have to make an effort not to be a complainer.

It has been said that ... **a complaining Christian is an oxymoron.**

Of all people ... we should be the least of complainers!

Q ... So as a follower of Christ, how do we fight against the temptation to complain?

Psalm 107 gives us some answers:

The Bible is clear: ... being **grateful** crushes a complaining spirit. The psalmist says ... that we always have greater reason to be thankful and grateful because ...

1. (1) God is so good to us!

... Give thanks to the Lord, for **he is good!** His faithful love endures forever.
... if we try really hard ... there are times that we can be good.
... but God alone is perfectly good all the time!
... His love and righteousness are perfect!
... and He loves you and wants to make you righteous!

2. (8) God is also the greatest!

... *Let them praise the Lord for his great love and for all his wonderful deeds to them.*

... the greatness of God can clearly be seen in all of His creation.

... what a beautiful world the Lord has made.

... spring time reveals the awesome handwork of God.

3. (9) God is God!

... *For he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.*”

... we can give gifts that make people happy ...

... but only God can satisfy the empty and longing souls of men,
women, boys and girls.

Take a moment today to thank God for His goodness to you and those you love. Resist the temptation to complain today when things don't go just the way you want them to. Trust God and be grateful. Make the most of your day!

Pastor Randy Green

Beating The Depression Bug!

Psalm 119:25-27

I am pretty sure that you would agree with me that yesterday ... **Resurrection Sunday** ... was different. Most people made the necessary adjustments to maintain social distancing by using zoom calls or some other form of media technology to visit with family or friends. It was ok ... but there is nothing like being together with each other.

Joyce and I worshipped at 9:30 and then had zoom Bible Study at 11:00. Then we had a great late lunch followed by another zoom call with our kids and my sister. Oh ... and did I mention that we celebrated Joyce's birthday. We had a wonderful day and the weather was so nice. It did get a little windy around dark. But all and all it was different but really nice!

I hope you had a happy **Resurrection Day**. As Christians we have so much to be thankful for. I love this group of Scriptures:

John 14:19 (NCV) ... *"In a little while the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live, too."*

2 Corinthians 1:8-10 (NLT) ... *"I think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and completely overwhelmed, and we thought we would never live through it. [9] In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we learned not to rely on ourselves, but on God who can raise the dead. [10] And he did deliver us from mortal danger. And we are confident that he will continue to deliver us."*

This side of heaven, we will never know how close we came to the Coronavirus and yet we didn't get it. You can call it luck if you want, but I'll always believe God had a hand in it. God taught Paul to trust and rely on Him. Live or die, Paul had learned to be content

with God's will.

I understand that not everyone is where Paul was. There are times when I get overwhelmed and a little depressed. Especially when you get forced out of your routine. Unwanted change can be depressing! With all that has been going on now for over a month, there are a lot of people, even Christians who are experiencing anxiety, depression, and stress. Please understand that you are not the first of God's children to feel this way. Listen to what the psalmist wrote as a result of being so depressed that he thought he was going to die.

Psalm 119:25-27 (NLT) ... *"I lie in the dust, completely discouraged; revive me by your word. [26] I told you my plans, and you answered. Now teach me your principles. [27] Help me understand the meaning of your commandments, and I will meditate on your wonderful miracles."*

Q ... How in the world do you fix those kinds of feelings?

... can I suggest a couple of things that have helped me:

1. Open up your Bible and start reading it.

The psalmist asks the Lord to revive him with Scripture. You will never hear God any better than when you immerse yourself in His Word. Let God speak to you. Come close to Him. Enjoy His company. Nothing defeats depression like beating loneliness.

2. Take some time and journal your prayers.

We all need to pray more. Writing down your prayers will help you be more consistent in praying. You will also be able to see how God answers your prayers. You never waste time when you pray! God loves to both hear and answer our prayers. The psalmist said ... *I told you my plans and you answered.* God will answer you as well.

3. Take some time and let Jesus make a stronger disciple out of you.

The psalmist says ... *Now teach me your principles. [27] Help me understand the meaning of your commandments, and I will meditate*

on your wonderful miracles. If you've never done this, read through the Gospel of John and learn about the ways of our Lord. You will never go wrong learning from the Master.

4. Last, I would encourage you to find a quiet place and spend some times **counting** your blessings and then **thank** the Lord.

We've all been blessed more than we deserve and more than we can count. If you want, try writing down your blessings. Then read back through them and give God some praise and glory that He so richly

deserves. Few things will drive depression in a whole like praising God for all that He has done for us.

Lord, we all have times when things are hard and life seems real tough. Please help us focus on you and trust you for all that we need. Thank you for all the times that you have helped us when we were not even aware that you were there. Thank you Lord Jesus!

Pastor Randy Green

No Matter What -- Trust God!

Psalm 143:8-10

Q ... On a scale of 1-10 ... how much do you really trust God?

Psalm 143:7-9 (NLT) ... “Come quickly, Lord, and answer me, for my depression deepens. Don't turn away from me, or I will die. [8] Let me hear of your unfailing love to me in the morning, ***for I am trusting you.*** Show me where to walk, for I have come to you in prayer. [9] Save me from my enemies, Lord; I run to you to hide me.”

People are getting restless with all of this staying at home and being off the road and away from people we know and love. You know Horses can become barn sour if you leave them in the barn too long or too much. Well, a lot of people are becoming house sour! Too much time at home. Too much isolation! And unfortunately ... that can lead to depressions and loneliness which are two difficult issues that are really hard to deal with by yourself. But then that's kind of the problem we are dealing with in the first place ... isolation!

Q ... When was the last time you ask God to intervene in a situation you were having a hard time dealing with?

David found himself doing that on a pretty regular basis. He seemed to always need God's help. We don't know the specifics of what caused David to write Psalm 143, but maybe he was struggling with one of his kids, or a relative who wanted his throne. He may have been having a tough time in his marriage ... or the death of a loved one. It could have also just been the pressure of ruling a vast kingdom of very different people.

Whatever it was, David needed God's help!

We all need the Lord's help. And the Lord welcomes our prayers that ask for relief and there are many times that He gives us the relief that we need and ask for. But the greatest proof that we really trust God is seen in

how we deal with our difficult life storms.

When you read this psalm ... you can clearly see that David did the right thing! He called out to God. In his own mind and heart, he could not know the ultimate solution to his dilemma, so he called out to God for several things that he was desperate for:

... he had to be sure that God truly loved him.

... he needed to know the direction that God would have him go in.

... he also needed to clearly understand God's will.

... David wanted to experience the righteousness of God.

Dr. Adam Dooley ... *Certainly we should believe that God is able to meet our needs instantaneously, but substantive faith requires more of us than momentary belief. The presence of difficulty forces us to accept God's love without conditions and to follow God's directions without explanations. Real trust does not waiver when answers are in short supply. Demonstrating that we love God more than the solace He offers necessitates finding ourselves in situations where relief does not come. Such difficult moments are less of a test of what God is able to do and more a proving ground for how much we are willing to trust Him.*

Proverbs 3:5-7 (NLT) ... “***Trust in the Lord with all your heart;*** do not depend on your own understanding. [6] Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths. [7] Don't be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, fear the Lord and turn your back on evil.”

I realize that from a very early age, we are taught to assess the situation and then come up with a well-educated solution that will give us the conclusion we desire. So trusting in our own reasoning is often far easier than trusting God. Therefore, we make a plan and go with it! But too often our plans fail us! And so the art of leaning on our own understanding can be discouraging and depressing. That's when we tend to become the most fearful about the future. Sometimes life can be so overwhelming that we begin to question why in the world would a loving God let us go through such difficulties.

Charles Stanley ... *But God does not look at the trials that come to you from the agonizing center of them like you do ... but from*

beginning to end from His all-knowing, eternal perspective. In fact, before trouble touches your life, He has already charted the course and engineered your circumstance to build your faith and character, help you know Him better, and guide you to ultimate triumph. Knowing all of this, He calls you to trust Him ... to refuse to rely on your assessment of the situation, but rather be confident that ... “The things that are impossible with people are possible with God” (Luke 18:27).

So friends, when a fresh life storm blows across your bow, know that it is ok to ask God for an exit strategy. God wants you to ask! But you also need to be ready to endure the trial and rest in His love and walk in His

ways even when He chooses not to intervene in the way that you hope for. God does know best! God knows how to work all things, good and bad, for your ultimate good.

Father, there is no one more trustworthy than you. We are the weak link in that equation. Lord, help us to be encouraged by focusing on the fact that when we trust in you, we are placing our lives in the hands of the all wise and all powerful God. You surely know how to take care of us. Thank You Lord.

Pastor Randy Green

Spirit and Truth

John 4:23

“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

As I was driving to the church building on Friday morning to meet with Pastor Randy and Pastor Art to record the Sunday morning message I heard a news commentator make the statement;

“This Sunday is Easter, and millions of Christians around the world will be *watching* Easter services while isolated at home.”

“watching...”

Sadly, I’m sure this is a very real and true statement. As a result of our current situation millions of people will in fact be at home... *watching* one or more Easter services, programs or even productions. I do believe that as long as the truth of God’s Word is presented He promises that His Word;

“...will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11 NIV)

But if all one does is *watch* a service on Easter Sunday, you will be missing out on the opportunity to join in fellowship with other believers and with God Himself - even in these times of isolation.

So just how is it possible to join in with other believers in the fellowship of worship when we are by necessity and expediency physically separated?

Long before there was an Internet, FaceBook, Twitter, Zoom or any other of the various ways people are connecting and communicating today God recorded through the Apostle John these words of Jesus that speak of His eternal nature;

“God is spirit”

Notice that Jesus does NOT say that God is “A” spirit, but that God “**IS**” spirit. Literally from the Greek:

“PNEUMA DEOS” or; “SPIRIT, GOD IS”

God's essential nature is spiritual and therefore His worshipers *“must worship in Spirit and truth.”*

These are the *“true worshipers...”*

I saw a post some one made the other day that went something along the lines of; “I kind of like the fact that I can stay home and just watch church on my computer. There are so many choices nowadays, and if I don’t like the music or sermon I can just switch to another.”

I’m certainly not going to be the one to judge... but does that sound like *“true worship...?”*

I think it is great that there are so many churches, many who may have never before posted or streamed their services (like us here at Harvest Fellowship) who are now doing just that. And God’s Word is being proclaimed in multiple ways and formats like never before. There really is a lot of good stuff out there!

But, I encourage you, at some point during your scrolling or searching what is out there, to actually spend some time *in* worship.

I know that there are many different ways to worship “in the Spirit and Truth.” Sometimes it may be in personal, quiet contemplation - “Be - ing”

Be still and know that I am God
Be still and know that I am
Be still and know
Be still
Be

But it is also important to join our hearts and spirits *together*
“in Spirit and truth”

Again, just how do we do that when we are physically separated?

God’s Word tells us that “God is Spirit” and also that He
“inhabith” or “dwells in” eternity .

“For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabith eternity,
whose name is Holy;” (Isaiah 57:15 KJV)

God, who *is* spirit, doesn't just jump in and out of the time line of creation or history of mankind at a particular point of His choosing. He "inhabith" or "dwells in" eternity. God is "right at home" in eternity.

So whether you join in worship in a corporate or congregational setting, at home with your family in front of a TV or computer screen, or even in solitude alone with God, as long as you are worshiping “in Spirit and Truth” you are joining with not only those who may happen to be “tuned - in” at that particular time, but with all believers of all time.

As you celebrate the resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ this Easter, I invite and encourage you to worship in -

“Spirit and Truth”

Faith

Hebrews 11:1

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

Ok... grab a piece of paper and something to write with
Now... Make 2 lists:

- 1st List: 3 things you can be absolutely sure of
2nd List: 3 things that you can NOT be absolutely sure of

Which ones do we have control of as humans?
Which ones does God have control over?

Are there any things on your list that might be just a bit scary to you? What might be the reason that they are scary to you?

Often people are frightened by those things which they feel they have no control over. I once knew a man who hated flying. The reason being that he had to relinquish his sense of control to the pilot of the airplane. He had to trust in, or have faith in, the ability of the pilot to safely get him from point A to point B.

How does it make any of us feel knowing that someone other than ourselves has control over our circumstances?

We all prefer to feel like we have some degree of control over our own circumstances, yet in these current times we are realizing that even something as unforeseen as a virus coming from half way around the world can usurp our perceived control.

Looking back at Hebrews 11:1 two words jump out at me...
“*confidence*” and “*assurance*.”

Now these may seem like two different words for the same thing (kind of like Coronavirus and Covid-19) but if you look at the original text you will see that there are actually two different words used in the Greek. You will also find that various English translations of this verse use different words;

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”
(KJV)

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”
(ESV)

“Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.”
(HCSB)

“*Confidence - assurance*,” “*substance - evidence*,” “*assurance - conviction*,” “*reality - proof*...” all combinations of words that speak of something we can be sure of, something of which we can be *certain*.

With respect to the coronavirus and its multifaceted ramifications, *uncertainty* seems to be the word of choice. We can't see the virus with the naked eye - it is a “*thing not seen*.” Yet we believe, we have faith, and in fact we are pretty sure that it is out there. We take whatever precautions we can. And we do those things that we can control, based on that belief - that “faith” as it were.

So you might even say we have “faith” in the coronavirus, because the evidence of one's faith is seen in how it affects their daily lives. And boy, oh boy - it has affected all of our lives!

But what if... our “Faith,” yeah, the capital “F” Faith... our Faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, had as visible and radical effect on our lives as this unseen virus?

I have shared Ephesians 2:8-9 many times in our Bible Study class:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.” (NIV)

But I am also quick to point out that Paul goes on to say:

“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (v.10)

With respect to the long term societal effects of this virus people are already saying: "Things will never be the same." But is that necessarily an *all bad* thing?

We have seen neighbors looking out for neighbors, friends and families looking out for each other, and acts of kindness being reported (if you look in the right places) all over.

Many churches, Harvest Fellowship included, are now making their Sunday services and weekly devotionals available online, and the Gospel is being presented and shared in new and exciting ways!

This unseen, uncertain virus most certainly did NOT take God by surprise. And... you can be absolutely sure that He is absolutely in control!

What if our “new normal” as believers, those who have been saved by grace through faith, is to actually *do* those “... *good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*”

There is one more word that I notice in this first verse of Hebrews chapter 11: “*Hope*”

As so many people are acutely tuned-in to the daily briefings, they all seemed to be looking and listening for some word of hope.

The writer of Hebrews shares earlier, in chapter 6:

“Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.”
(Hebrews 6:18b-19a)

During this time of so-called uncertainty may the evidence of our certain faith be seen in how we live our lives in and for Christ, “*our hope of glory,*” the “*strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.*”

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Beating the Odds

1 Corinthians 15:55

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

The Apostle Paul posed this question almost 2000 years ago, but I had the privilege just this past week to witness the truth and power of this verse played out in real time.

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to wreak havoc on our world and the statistics regarding the number of those who have already succumbed to this disease continue to grow, we are nevertheless already hearing testimonies of God’s amazing grace and miraculous healing.

I would like to share just a part of one such story. I say only “just a part” of this story because I know the individual I am referring to is very much looking forward to the day when we as a church family can once again gather together and he himself can stand before you and testify of God’s goodness.

As we all know, certain individuals are at a much higher risk for serious complications from COVID-19, especially those with pre-existing respiratory conditions. This person fell squarely in that category.

I received a phone call in the early morning hours that he was having severe breathing problems and had been taken to the emergency room and was very likely going to need to be intubated.

One exasperating consequence of the protocols in place as a result of this virus is that, as pastors, we are not even allowed to physically “be” with those with whom we desire to minister to. Yet somehow we were able to connect by phone, and even while gasping for breath he shared with me the seriousness of the situation.

But it was what he said to me as the doctors were even then coming in to make this most grave decision, a decision that could literally determine his survival, that I want to share with you;

“If this works I’ll get to stay here for a while longer... if not I get to go to be with Jesus - either way I win...”

“Either way I win...” - Talk about beating the odds!

I’m really not a numbers/math kind of person. As I have told others before, give me a crossword puzzle over a sudoku any day.

But we are daily being bombarded with all sorts of numbers, figures, ratios and grim statistics as the news media and experts try to keep us abreast of the situation regarding COVID-19.

What do all these numbers mean? What are *my* chances of contracting the virus? If I do contract the virus, what are *my* chances... *my* odds of survival? What is the overall mortality rate?

These are all very real questions, and sadly for many a cause for very real concern and even worry.

A cynic once made the statement to me (and incidentally he was a physician) that; “Life is a terminal disease with a 100% mortality rate.”

In one sense he was correct, for even God’s word tells us that:
“For as in Adam all die...” (1 Cor. 15:22a)

But what a dismal way to look at this incredible gift of life, formed in the very image of the creator. Because even though “as in Adam we all die” - if Jesus Christ does not return in our physical lifetime - we will all eventually face physical death. But the rest of that verse proclaims the promise that those who are “in Christ,” those who belong to Him will be made alive.

“Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life.” (1 Cor. 15:22 NLT)

Which brings me back to my story. This dear friend and brother was NOT intubated, was NOT placed on a respirator, did NOT test positive for the coronavirus... but IS back home! (I’ll let him share the details)

As we prayed on the phone that morning his dear wife was praying, and calling others to pray, who called others... who called others...

And you might say he was “given new life...”

But the truth is: he already had that new life, he had already experienced being “in” Christ, and therefore the glorious riches of God’s mystery, which is; *“Christ in you, the hope of glory.”* (Col. 1:27)

I’m sure somewhere, in some record system or CDC tabulation there will be an entry of this one who tested negative for COVID-19 and was not added to the mortality ratio, this one that “beat the odds.”

But we know that the odds were already beaten because;

“Either way I win...”

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

Connected

Ephesians 4:16a (TPT)

“For his body has been formed in his image and is closely joined together and constantly connected as one..”

Staying “connected” - another one of those buzz phrases we have been hearing a lot here lately, especially as we who are members of a local church family are having to find new and inventive ways to do just that.

But thankfully, we don’t have to “invent” or “re-invent the wheel” as it were. There is this thing called... the internet.

I did a little research on the origins of the internet, and from the best I could determine it began with:

“The first ARPANET link was established between the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) at 22:30 hours on October 29, 1969.

"We set up a telephone connection between us and the guys at SRI ...", Kleinrock ... said in an interview: "We typed the L and we asked on the phone, "Do you see the L?"

"Yes, we see the L," came the response.

We typed the O, and we asked, "Do you see the O."

"Yes, we see the O."

Then we typed the G, and the system crashed ...”

They were only able to send the letters "lo" from one computer to another before the system crashed—three letters short of their intended word: login. Yet a revolution had begun.

Fast forward 50 years and here we are. The internet and all of the “connectivity” that it provides are a part of our everyday lives.

I came across an article from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, an organization that has often been at the forefront of using technology for advancing the Gospel, that gave some very practical guidelines for using the internet and social media to be a light for Christ.

Though there is often toxic behavior that goes along with online conversations, here are 3 ways to make a difference - even when online behavior may go bad:

1. Be Uplifting

Much of today’s internet use is spent on social media sites like Facebook. These popular platforms give us a way to feel connected despite being apart—and they’re driven by the desire for community. People want to feel their family and friends—even strangers—care.

So when you see someone sharing a struggle online, say something. Comment with a prayer or encouraging Bible verses. Consider sending a private message, especially if you can relate to what he or she is going through. Or if you have a personal connection, give the person a call. You never know how these simple gestures could inspire someone. And you can always share helpful resources that point to God if you don’t quite know what to say.

These tips also apply when a person shares good news. Don’t be afraid to publicly celebrate someone’s success, whether you’re close or not. This can present a great opportunity to talk about God’s love and provision.

2. Turn the Other Cheek

Have you ever found yourself verbally attacked online? Because of the perceived anonymity of the internet, many people are more outspoken or confrontational than they would be in person. First, do a heart check and make sure this isn’t you.

If you do witness an online bully or “troll” (someone lurking only to stir up trouble), pause and consider whether it’s worth a response. Oftentimes, it’s better to ignore these distractions, or respond in love rather than retaliate.

Romans 12:17 (NASB) says, *“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.”*

Whether it’s devastating news or tragedy you read about on the internet or a random online encounter with someone on a mission to be hurtful, God can help us to remain calm and loving. Ask Him to transform your heart so this is your first instinct over anger or hate.

3. Counter Lies with God’s Truth

“Don’t believe everything you read on the internet.” This quote has been jokingly attributed to Abraham Lincoln. It’s true, there are many lies floating around online, and some of them are about God, His Word and what faith in Christ means.

As tempting as it may be to remain quiet, it’s imperative you don’t hide your faith in Christ—especially when your faith is being challenged. God calls us to be unashamed of the Gospel and gives us many tools to share His truth—including the internet. Trust that He’ll guide you as you stand firm.

Through it all, remember God’s sovereignty and that, even when it seems evil is winning online or elsewhere, Jesus already won the battle.

As Billy Graham once said, “Thank God for every tool He gives us to declare the life-changing message of Jesus Christ to a world that desperately needs Him. And pray that Satan’s efforts will be seen for what they are, leading only to corruption and emptiness and death.”

We here at Harvest Fellowship are using the internet and social media as a way to “stay connected” during these days of isolation. We, along with other believers around the world - the world wide church on the world wide web - are using these platforms to share the message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

May “...the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, (and the posts on our pages) be pleasing in your sight,
Oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.”

Psalm 19:14 (RKB paraphrase)

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Tangled

Hebrews 12:1-2

Disney release another princess movie a few years ago about Rapunzel and her long hair. Clearly it was not as terrible and tragic as the original Grimm brother's tale. Rapunzel is known primarily for her long hair. In the original, she was locked in a tower by a witch, a tower which held neither door nor stairs. Her captor, a witch who cared for her as a mother, would climb Rapunzel's hair to see her. Because it's a fairy tale, of course, the story turns tragic before a brief declaration at the end that "they lived happily ever after."

Disney's version is adequately entitled *Tangled*.

I have to be honest with you, that's a great title for my own life. How much time have I spent tangled up?

We get tangled in jobs we despise.

We get tangled in relationships that are bad for us.

We get tangled in habits that lead only to pain.

The writer of Hebrews points out one more thing that tangles us up: sin.

Heb 12:1-2-- *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off*

everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

This sin is different for each of us. The author makes it a point to say that we are running a race.

I just did a 5k race yesterday. Yes it was a real thing. It's called a virtual race. Not everyone can travel to an event and through virtual races you can run alone at your own convenience on your own course and even get "swag." Swag is your t-shirt, race bib and finisher's medal. Register online, pay your entry fee and instead of picking up your swag on race day, they mail it to you. Once you post your finishing time they send you a medal.

The writer of Hebrews transitions from a description of those in the faith hall of fame (Heb 11) to how we are supposed to live "since we also are surrounded by such a great crowd of witnesses".

The starting point of running the race set before you is getting untangled. I like the term "throw off everything that hinders you." Throw them off! As someone who has seen a lot of movies I have watched several fight scenes where someone has a net as a weapon (gladiator movies, superhero movies, etc). One point of the net as a weapon is that it restricts movement. During a fight it has a second purpose: to distract and frustrate the one entangled so that his opponent can attack.

The writer says that since we have so many of our faith heroes around who have disentangled themselves and moved on to glory, we are to be encouraged to do the same. We know it can be done because so many others have done it in the past! For each of us we get tangled up differently and in different things than others do. The sin that tangles you up may not be an issue for me at all. The sins that tangle me may not be a problem for you. Some sins are problems for most, if not all, of us.

Did you consider that there is another cloud of witnesses? Those that watch you each day. Your friends, family members, coworkers, fellow students, etc. You may find it hard to put yourself in the same category as Abraham, Moses or the others. But there are others who are not faith heroes at all, but are watching you run your race. What are you showing them? They may not be cheering you on, in fact they may be cheering for the other guy, but they see you.

It's also interesting that we are not told to run with speed, but to run with endurance. This is not a sprint, but a marathon, or as they have now, ultramarathons. I knew an ultramarathoner. His son was in my daughter's karate class and at the time I was doing triathlons so we talked running sometimes as our kids beat each other up.

He shared that he had just run his first ultramarathon: a 100-mile trail run. And HE FINISHED! He said it was the hardest thing he had ever done in his life. He smiled as he said it. He was not the first place finisher, or even close to the first place finisher, but he was a finisher. He

ran his race as he had trained to do it, as his body allowed him to do it, and as he was equipped to do it. And there were almost no witnesses. A few family members and local citizens there to watch the runners as they ran.

Use any metaphor you want for the race you're running, but make no mistake, you are running. You can say it's an ultramarathon because it is extremely long and grueling and sometimes lonely. You can say it's a virtual race because your course is different than anyone else's. You can say it's a sanctioned race with a crowd surrounding you to watch.

But however you're running, however long it takes, whoever is watching, you've got to untangle yourself so you can run, keeping your eyes on the prize: Jesus.

Lord, thank you for allowing me to run. Thank you that I can depend on you to free me from the sins that wrap me up and slow me down, the things that will cause me to trip and fall on my face. Cut me loose so that I can run. Show me what I need to do to break free and get the prize. Amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

That's a Nunya

John 21:20-23

In John 20 and 21 we see the account of Jesus appearing to the disciples after his resurrection. In John 21 after Peter and some of the others decide to go fishing, Jesus shows up, provides fish in an amazing way and then feeds the disciples breakfast. Afterward he has a conversation with Peter, which is probably one of the most famous conversations in Scripture and maybe the most important conversation in Peter's life.

On the night of Jesus' betrayal and trial the disciples scattered and Peter hung out by a fire, maybe hoping to hide in the crowd. While he was there, a young girl recognized him before others began to as well, as one of the guys hanging out with Jesus. Peter, as predicted by Jesus, denied it. You can read the account in John 18 (and Matthew 26 and Mark 14 and Luke 22). Yeah, it's pretty important.

In this post-breakfast conversation on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius Jesus asked Peter three times if Peter loved him. Three times Peter said he did and three times Jesus told Peter to take care of his flock. Then he pretty much told Peter he would because of it.

That's the backstory, which I encourage you to read (at least chapter 21 for the immediate context).

Here's where the conversation derails. As soon as Jesus tells Peter to continue on in the ministry and that it would cost him his life, Peter says, "Uh huh. What about John?"

When my brain converts the story to a movie, I see Jesus being exasperated and blurting out, "What do you care?"

Maybe Jesus wasn't exasperated and maybe he didn't just spit out a response, but the response recorded by John isn't that far off.

John 21:20-23-- *So Peter turned around and saw the disciple Jesus loved following them, the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and asked, "Lord, who is the one that's going to betray you?" When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" "If I want him to remain until I come," Jesus answered, "what is that to you? As for you, follow me." So this rumor spread to the brothers and sisters that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not tell him that he would not die, but, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?"*

I have a friend who's kind of a wise guy (I know, hard to believe), and he was fond of using a phrase that pretty quickly caught on in our little circle. His phrase was "That's a nunya," as in "that's nunya business." In fact, on a forum we were a part of for a class, under his name, his place of residence was listed as "Nunya Business District."

This is pretty much Jesus' answer to Peter.

"Peter, follow me and feed my sheep."

"Okay. What about John."

"That's nunya business. YOU follow me."

Like Peter, we tend to deflect our conversations with Jesus to other issues or to the way God is working or not working in the lives of others. This is not us caring about how to care for others or to bear their burdens. Instead this is usually us looking for excuses not to obey God's call for us.

God's call to us is to follow him. Jesus said, "Follow me." He didn't say "Follow me unless you have some reasonable objection to the way I am working in your friend's life." He didn't say, "Follow me to the extent that you can grasp the depths of breadth of my working in the world."

Sometimes people resist following Jesus because they feel like God owes them an explanation for how he is going to save the secluded tribes in South America or Africa. I seriously doubt God is going to consider that as a good point in one's argument against obedience. If you don't believe me, read the last few chapters of Job.

The truth is, Jesus' call is very simple: "Follow me." What's interesting is that Jesus called Peter by saying, "Follow me" and he reminded Peter that his call is still the same after Peter had denied Jesus: "Follow me."

Wherever you are in your spiritual journey, the call is exactly the same: "Follow me." That's the starting point. Now, Jesus will modify the specifics of that call, but it is always "Follow me."

"Follow me... to this school."

"Follow me... to this job."

"Follow me... to this city."

"Follow me... to this ministry opportunity."

"Follow me... to this place of healing."

Ultimately he will say, "Follow me... home."

"But Jesus, what about them?"

"That's a nunya."

Thank you, Jesus, for being so personal with me. Thank you for calling me to follow you in a way and to places you have prepared specifically for me. Thank you for calling me by name and customizing me for your call. Forgive me for being distracted by your work in the world rather than being excited for it; and rather than being encouraged by your bigness, using it as an excuse not to simply follow you. I love you, Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

All Them Legos

Acts 9:31

Our son loves Legos. Our daughter loved them, too, but they are both different in the way they play with Legos and what they do with them.

When our daughter was small, and even into upper middle school she would get Lego sets from family or would choose them for herself if given the chance. She like the "Lego Friends" collection, which were smaller sets and very specific. She would get the ice cream shop or the pet groomer or the the boutique, and would spend a couple of hours putting it together. Then she would show us her finished work and set it on a shelf, never to be touched again. Or so she thought.

Our son, on the other hand, would get Lego sets and would spend some time putting it together, would show us his fire truck or x-wing fighter or Imperial Walker and it would look just the way it was supposed to. A few minutes later he would come down and say, "Now look what I made."

As soon as he had a Lego set finished, he would break it apart and use the pieces to build something else with them. He has none of his specialized Lego sets sitting on the shelf. They are all mixed together in re-creations of visions in his head, inventions and unique robots.

A couple of years ago our daughter, now graduating high school, came downstairs and ratted her brother out because he had taken her Lego town apart and was using the pieces to mix in with his own to build stuff!

And it looked so pretty sitting on the shelf.j

Naturally we got onto her brother, but his sister soon let it go and let him have the pieces because he was using them. For her it was more about the nostalgia and about him taking something that wasn't his to take. Once she realized his intent was just to use what he found and repurpose it according to its design, she more easily let it go.

Acts 9:31 *So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.*

The church is facing a new situation and we have to make some decisions, but it's important to understand that the church is built of individual people. While we are classified as an organization or as a body, we are a body of individuals, much like the Lego sets my kids use are individual blocks.

In the Acts 9 passage above, no one is mentioned by name, but the behavior and choices named are individual in nature. In order for the church to live in the fear of the Lord, it is each person who individually lives in the fear of the Lord. In order for the church to be encouraged by the

Holy Spirit, it is each individuals who are personally encouraged by the Holy Spirit.

When I was growing up I never had Legos. I had Brix Blox. They were cheaper, came in four shapes and had the broad color range of red, white, blue and some clear blox in case your perfectly square house wanted a hazy window next to the door that wouldn't open.

We tried to match them with name-brand Legos a few times. They didn't fit. At all. Only Legos fit Legos. Because Legos are specifically designed to fit with every other Lego and also not to match perfectly with cheap Lego imitations.

God has set the church up the same way. Only true followers of Christ will mesh with other true followers of Christ to be stuck together and build a masterpiece. Even if those followers come from different sets and have different shapes or color schemes, they can connect with the others as if they were meant to be together. Because they were.

Right now the church is trying to find a new way to join together and to minister. Maybe you, individually, are in the same boat. I know I have been. My life is different than it had ever been. My way of doing ministry is being challenged, my way of connecting with people is being challenged, my way of connecting with my family is being challenged, but I'm learning to adjust to it. And when the church gathers in person we will adjust to that new way, too. The Legos will still match up, even if it seems a little strange at first.

Because, like the early church, we can have peace and strength, but it is because of each individual living in the fear of the Lord and each of us being encouraged by the Holy Spirit.

Whatever we see as an awkward change or a strange way of being a church or whatever new challenge we need to handle it is crucial that we each live in the fear of the Lord and gain our encouragement from the Holy Spirit.

Soon enough, like my daughter and her Lego creations, we will realize that the nostalgia is fine, and what we held so tightly to, is just being repurposed to build something new, just as the pieces were designed for.

Father, thank you for this little verse in Acts that reminds us that our role has two parts: to live in the fear of the Lord and to draw our encouragement from the Holy Spirit. Rather than from the CDC, our memories of how things used to be, or the way we wish they were, we need to continue to look to you and to follow you. You know how you want the church to look, what it is designed for, and what our parts are in it. Thank you that we're shaped to fit into it at all. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Been There, Done That

Titus 3:3-5

Have you ever heard the term "Been there?" as a statement of sympathy for what someone is going through?

"My boss is really on my back this week!"

"Been there, man."

The response has since expanded to "Been there, done that" and eventually it became, "Been there, done that, got the t-shirt."

In our text and abbreviation society it has become "BTDT" or "BTDT GTTS".

Sympathy is important and it comes best from people who have been where you are and have come through what you are going through. Some people are great with it while others aren't.

I have good news and bad news for you. You can become a sympathetic person. That's the good news. The bad news is that sympathy is a skill better earned than bought. Unfortunately some people, rather than becoming sympathetic to others experiencing what they

themselves have experienced, use it as a way to bludgeon people with it.

"I got through it. What's the big deal? Stop crying."

Titus 3:3-5-- *For we too were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by various passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, detesting one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, he Saved us-- not by works of righteousness we had done, but according to his mercy-- through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*

Titus is being reminded by Paul what it means to disciple people. One of the things he reminds him is that he and the other disciples, including Titus himself, had been where the other believers were. They, too, were trying to live a godly life as a minority while surrounded by those who weren't trying to, or even had no concept.

One of the things we have a problem with as believers, is that we expect unbelievers to follow the same moral code we follow. That's a poor expectation. We should expect unbelievers to act like unbelievers, whatever that looks like.

Paul reminds Titus of the contrast between who they were before Christ saved them and who they have become afterward. He is also careful to remind him that it was not because they acted right that God saved them, but it was by God's own love and mercy.

So the question becomes, how are you responding to those around you, whether believers or unbelievers?

Are you responding in sympathy? When you see or hear of someone who is an unbeliever acting like an unbeliever, are you angry about it, or do pray for them, hoping for an opportunity for them to hear the truth and respond?

Or what about immature believers, maybe new believers? Do you think, "He's a Christian now! He shouldn't do those things!"? Or do you look at your own spiritual journey and recognize all the work God has done in you and still has to do?

Bill Vaughan says, "One of life's major mistakes is being the last member in the family to come down with the flu -- after all the sympathy has run out."

The truth is, if God has saved you he has saved you out of your old nature and has spent every day since then working with you to look more and more like his Son, Jesus. Part of what that looks like is causing our past to be unpleasant for us when we look back on it. We can look back at all the harsh words we spoke, all the terrible decisions we made, all the selfish choices and all the people we hurt, and we can see all the work God has done to free us from it.

But we need to see that as a way of sympathy, understanding what someone is struggling with because we too have struggled. The grace of God, displayed

through us, comes often in a time of struggle. It's when people look up, hoping to see if anyone will be there for them.

When people are hurting, whether you know them or not, and they are down, they will look up. When they look up and see you, will they see you with your hand outstretched to help them up? Or will they see you with a stone in your hand?

Imagine their surprise when, expecting a stone, they see an outstretched hand and hear your voice, saying, "Neither do I condemn you."

Father, we are all so broken. We tend to go our own way and we can so easily lose sympathy for people who haven't quite overcome what we have, as if we can't fall away again. Help us to remember that people are looking for You, even if they don't know it. And we have been called to be your ambassadors. Help me to represent You correctly. Help me to see with Your eyes and to reach out to others with love of Christ and not just with my own hardness. Soften me to love like Jesus loves. Amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Forgiven To Forgive!

Colossians 3:12-15

It is a strange world that we live in. God created each of us for relationships. He has given us both the need and the ability to have relationships with Him and each other. Sin has greatly messed up our ability to have and maintain healthy relationships. But the need for relationships still remains. Thus the struggle we have with loneliness and rejection.

We have been dealing with this viral pandemic now for a couple of months. And the affects of isolations are beginning to take their toll. People are struggling from the youngest to the oldest. We were not created to live in isolation. We were made for relationships.

Many things force us into isolations. Some things we choose take us into isolations. Cell phones and computers cause more isolations today than anything else! People are spending so much time on these devices that we are loosing the ability to rightly relate to each other. Our kids are not learning how to do relationships. But they still have a great need for them. So do we!

No one handles rejections well. Rejection is the opposite of what God intended with relationships. There are things that should be rejected. God tells us to reject sinful thoughts and deeds. We are to reject any sinful path that would lead us away from God. Even God will in the end reject all who reject His Son Jesus Christ. The wise should reject ungodly things. There is a right way to use rejection.

One of the greatest challenges today that I see plaguing people is the inability to deal with rejection. We just don't do rejection very well. We all need to learn how to cope with rejection because in some form or another, we will all be rejected at some point in life. Jesus certainly understands rejection. He lived a life full of rejections. How did Jesus respond?

Charles Stanley ... *They had unjustly beaten Him, humiliated Him, and stripped Him of His garments, and now they are*

suffocating Jesus to death by crucifixion. He is the Messiah ... the Son of the living God ... and He has come to save the world from sin. Although His mission was the most sacred and noble in all history, the people repaid Him by falsely accusing Him and putting Him on a cross to die an excruciatingly painful death.

Jesus experienced the ultimate rejection!

... we crucified Him!

Q ... So how did Jesus deal with His rejection?

... the same way we should!

Luke 23:32-35 (NLT) ... *“Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. [33] Finally, they came to a place called the Skull. All three were crucified there—Jesus on the center cross, and the two criminals on either side.*

[34] Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing.’ And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice.

[35] The crowd watched, and the leaders laughed and scoffed. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘let him save himself if he is really God's Chosen One, the Messiah.’”

When Jesus was rejected ... He forgave those who rejected Him.

What is interesting here, is that the way Jesus responded to those who rejected Him demonstrates the unconditional love of the Father. Jesus knew that these people did not understand who they were rejecting. They at that point had no way of knowing the eternal plan of God to save the world through His Son. They did not know how sin infested they really were and how much they desperately needed this Savior! They lived in the moment ... and for them at that moment ... Jesus was not what they wanted ... so they rejected Him. But praise God that He carried out His plan and worked through their ignorance to make salvation available to the world through Jesus!

I strongly suspect that all of us are just like those who rejected Jesus. We don't understand what we are doing! We don't understand how much we need Jesus.

We all need to be forgiven by Jesus! It is your only chance of living in eternity with God! Only Jesus can forgive and reconcile you to God. Praise God there is no one He can't forgive!

1 Corinthians 1:30 (NLT) ... *"God alone made it possible for you to be in Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made Christ to be wisdom itself. He is the one who made us acceptable to God. He made us pure and holy, and he gave himself to purchase our freedom."*

Ephesians 1:7 (NLT) ... *"He is so rich in kindness that he purchased our freedom through the blood of his Son, and our sins are forgiven."*

We also need to learn to forgive like Jesus. Even those who reject us need to be forgiven. Forgiving others releases us from becoming bitter. Forgiveness is a sure path to the joy God wants us to enjoy.

Ephesians 4:32 (NLT) ... *"Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."*

Colossians 3:12-15 (NLT) ... *"Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. [13] You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so*

you must forgive others. [14] And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony. [15] And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful."

Because Jesus forgave you ... you can forgive others. You have been forgiven to forgive. That may not change them, but it can certainly change you! You are only responsible to forgive them ... you can't make them stop rejecting you. You can't change their ways. You can however forgive like Jesus and know that the Father above loves you unconditionally no matter what others do. He loves you and will never stop loving you. Just think ... the most important Person in all the universe loves you and has accepted you because Jesus forgave you. God loves you unconditionally!

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***Father, thank you for loving me the way I am. Jesus, thank you for forgiving all my sin and making me right with God my Creator. Holy Spirit, teach me to have a forgiving spirit. Help me to forgive those who have wronged me and please help me to forgive myself. Thank you for teaching me I am loved and that I can forgive!***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# The Peace of Christ Jesus

Colossians 3:15-17

How do you find peace in the middle of a life storm? Well the very first thing you have to do is remember what Jesus promised you concerning the peace we all need.

**John 14:27 (NLT) ... “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid.”**

In this passage, Jesus tied the truths revealed by the Holy Spirit to genuine peace. Jesus also promised that the peace we receive from the Holy Spirit is not the kind of peace that our world gives us. His peace is very different. It is a lasting, eternal peace. It doesn't come and go. It stays with you. It is a peace that grows. If you experience true peace in this world, it will have to come from Jesus. When you have this peace, there is no need to fear anything!

If you want this kind of peace, you must let the peace of God rule in your heart. If you want to find a calming tranquility when your life is upside down with difficulties you have no control over, disappointment that you can't make go away, and discouragement that seems to have no end ... then you have to decide to let God's supernatural peace exercise authority over your sinful self. In other words, you need a God generated peace. A supernatural peace!

Well, how do you get this kind of peace? What you can't find in the world is only found in the Word of God. The Living Word of God. You must let the Word of Christ dwell in you. You find the peace of God as you dwell on both the living and written Word of God. Owning a Bible will not give you this peace. It is not a lucky rabbits foot. You have to open and read God's Word to find His peace.

**Colossians 3:15-17 (NLT) ... “And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful. [16] Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you**

**wise**. Use his words to teach and counsel each other. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. [17] And whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, all the while giving thanks through him to God the Father.”

**Psalm 119:9-11 (NIV) ... “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. [10] I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. [11] I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”**

Dwight L. Moody once said, “*The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible.*”

There are three things I suggest you do with God's Word:

1. Make time each day to **read** God's precious Word.
2. Intentionally work at memorizing God's Word so you can **remember** it.
3. **Rely** on God's Word everyday for the peace that you can't live without.

**Paul Purvis ... Let peace rule, let the Word of Christ dwell, and let everything you do be done in the name of the Lord Jesus. When you invite Jesus into the center of life's storm, He may or may not change the weather, but He will definitely change you.**

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Lord, help me to fall in love with your precious Word. Create in me a thirst for all the truth you have spoken through Scripture. Your Word is truth and it is peace. Holy Spirit guide me through the Words of my Father and help me to trust Him more and more with my everyday life. Thank you for thinking of me.

Pastor Randy

Don't Worry

Luke 12:26

*"Since you cannot do this very little thing,
why do you worry about the rest?"*

Earlier this week I shared a devotional and song from a parable Jesus told in the 12th chapter of Luke - I called it:

"The Six I'd Fool"

After He had told that parable, Jesus went on to say to His disciples:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?"

As we prepare to return to our "new normal..." (Seems to be everyone's favorite buzz word these days) we can take these words of Jesus to heart.

But we must be careful to define "worry."

The dictionary defines worry as: *"to torment oneself with or suffer from disturbing thought, to fret or be anxious about"*

In fact some versions actually translate this verse;

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life,"

The Apostle Paul admonishes us to:

"...not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."
Philippians 4:6

But there is a very real difference between not worrying, or not being anxious, and exercising prudent caution.

As many of you have probably heard by now, we are actively making the necessary preparations to try to hold a corporate worship service on Sunday, May 31. Praise God!

After a lengthy Leadership Team Zoom meeting this past week we formulated a plan to move forward with the first phase of reopening our church building for public assembly. And I say church *building* because, hopefully and prayerfully, we as *the* church have continued to worship even while we were not able to assemble together in one place.

As we formulate these plans and put in place the recommended safeguards we do so realizing that we can only do so much. Just like when you go to the grocery store, or the hardware store, or the gas station, or any of the other "essential" businesses that you may have had to visit out of necessity, there will be a certain risk associated with us reopening for worship. Please be assured that we are doing everything we can to minimize any risk factors.

Now, I could be "spiritually flippant" and just say:

"Ah... don't worry about it..."

But again, there is a very real difference between not worrying and exercising prudent caution.

Some might say; “We just need to trust God,” and that too, is a very true and correct statement, for indeed we need to trust God in every area of our life.

I was speaking with someone just this week about this very topic and I shared that yes, I do trust God for His divine protection - but I still wear my seatbelt.

(And incidentally, from a strictly statistical standpoint you are more likely to be involved in a traffic accident than contract the virus:

VDH Covid-19 as of 10:30am May 21,2020:

Isle of Wight: 121 cases, 10 hospitalized, 3 deaths

2019 VDOT Traffic Crash Data:

Isle of Wight County: 620 crashes, 11 fatalities, 229 injuries.

...but let's not worry about that...)

I found it interesting the way Jesus stated this admonition to not worry;

“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?

Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

“This very little thing...?”

It is reported that the final dying words of Queen Elizabeth I were:

“All my possessions for one moment of time.”

It doesn't sound like it was a “very little thing” to the Queen of England! But to the Eternal Creator of the Universe it is in fact a *“very little thing.”*

So as we trust God with our very lives we need not *“worry about the rest.”*

As some of us gather hopefully together again on the 31st, we realize that there will also be some who are not comfortable or ready to join in public gatherings, even carefully controlled ones, at this time. And we absolutely understand that.

But please, let it be out of a sense of personal caution rather than worry...

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

What Are You Trusting In?

Isaiah 30:18

That is a very interesting question? And you had better have the right answer. Your life could depend on it! So be careful!

I keep hearing really important questions being asked concerning the Coronavirus, social distancing, and how quickly we should open things back up and move in the direction of getting our lives back to where they were. It seems like the doctors and experts all have the same response. I keep hearing these words ... ***“That’s a good question!”*** But nobody seems to be giving the answers we need. Oh, I have heard one answer that sounds good and enticing ... ***“Trust science”*** ... but the questions still remain and they are unanswered.

What really concerns me is that very few are telling you to trust God. But then this is not the first time that the idea of trusting God for the help we need has not been a part of the considered solutions. Mankind has made that mistake many times before. You would think we would learn from our mistakes.

Isaiah 30:18 (NLT) ... *“So the Lord must wait for you to come to him so he can show you his love and compassion. For the Lord is a faithful God. Blessed are those who wait for him to help them.”*

A careful study of this chapter finds that the first seventeen verses are a stern rebuke to Judah for not seeking God’s will and His help concerning the nation of Assyria. The Assyrians were a devastating plague to so many neighboring nations. Like us, their questions and answers were absolutely critical! Be careful who you listen too!

In their situation, King Hezekiah chose to listen to his experts who urged him to trust in the might of the Egyptians instead of calling out to God and trusting in Him. God had done so much for His people and yet they turn away from Him and they put their trust in a substandard solution. They began as a nation who trusted God, but the longer they existed, the less they depended on God. Sounds familiar! As Paul wrote in **Romans 1:22 (NLT)** ... ***“Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools.”***

Things change and not always for the best. Unlike their godly leaders of old ... men like Moses, Joshua, and David ... these newer rulers of Jerusalem refused to ask God for the answers to their most urgent questions. Instead, they trusted in the science of their day and listened to the words of men.

Even so, men of God like Isaiah sounded the alarm and warned the people of what would happen to their nation if they refused to go to God and instead turned to trust the lies of men. Read what God told Isaiah to relay to His people:

Isaiah 30:8-15 (NLT) ... *“Now go and write down these words concerning Egypt. They will then stand until the end of time as a witness to Israel’s unbelief. [9] For these people are stubborn rebels who refuse to pay any attention to the Lord’s instructions.*

[10] They tell the prophets, ‘Shut up! We don’t want any more of your reports.’ They say, ‘Don’t tell us the truth. Tell us nice things. Tell us lies. [11] Forget all this gloom. We have heard more than enough about your ‘Holy One of Israel.’ We are tired of listening to what he has to say.’

[12] This is the reply of the Holy One of Israel: ‘Because you despise what I tell you and trust instead in oppression and lies, [13] calamity will come upon you suddenly. It will be like a bulging wall that bursts and falls. In an instant it will collapse and come crashing down. [14] You will be smashed like a piece of pottery—shattered so completely that there won’t be a piece left that is big enough to carry coals from a fireplace or a little water from the well.’

*[15] The Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says, ‘**Only in returning to me and waiting for me will you be saved.** In quietness and confidence is your strength. But you would have none of it.’*

Notice the long suffering nature of God. This chapter reveals that since His people would not wait on Him, He would choose to wait on them. Look again with me at verse 18.

Isaiah 30:18 (NLT) ... *“So the Lord must wait for you to come to him so he can show you his love and compassion. For the Lord is a faithful God. Blessed are those who wait for him to help them.”*

Notice also that there was going to be a time of discipline followed by a time of restoration. As a loving Father, God is not afraid to correct and discipline His children. There are time when we need more than a spiritual timeout. Never forget that God is certainly a God of love but He is also a God of justice. When His people sin, we will face times of judgment, but we can also rejoice in the fact that because God loves us, he offers us His forgiveness and our restoration.

2 Peter 3:8-9, 15a (NLT) ... “*But you must not forget, dear friends, that a day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. [9] The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent. ... [15a] And remember, **the Lord is waiting so that people have time to be saved.**”*

Be careful who you trust!

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***Lord, save us from ourselves. Teach us to trust in you and not our own wisdom. You alone know what is best for us. Please turn our hearts back to you in revival. Fan the flames of a Great Awakening throughout our nation and around the world. We desperately need you, O Lord!***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# Take Time To Rejoice In The Lord

### Isaiah 61:10-11

It's raining outside this morning. For some that is not good. But the rain will help me because I planted peas in my garden last week. The rain will help the seed to spring forth from the ground. So I have good reason to praise God. Not just because of the rain, but because this morning when I began my day with prayer, God met me with His presence, power, and promises. I spoke to Him and He spoke back through His written Word ... the Bible. Scripture after Scripture all joined hands to bring peace and assurance to my heart and mind. He knew just what I needed to hear. These were the first words I was given this morning.

Everyone has to go through times that are like cold, barren winter months where we have to endure weariness and struggle. That is life. But spring is coming. And even when your life seems like barren soil, God promises to bring forth new life in you like a spring planted garden.

**Tim Detellis ... *God's promises are true. Whether you are skipping through good times or plodding through a difficult season, you can trust God's faithfulness will prevail. He is with you through it all, and He will make sure what He has sown within you will***

**Isaiah 61:10-11 (NLT) ... “I am overwhelmed with joy in the Lord my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness. I am like a bridegroom in his wedding suit or a bride with her jewels. [11] The Sovereign Lord will show his justice to the nations of the world. Everyone will praise him! His righteousness will be like a garden in early spring, filled with young plants springing up everywhere.”**

Only God knows where you are and what you are truly dealing with. But He knows and He cares and He knows how to help you. Everyone has good days and bad days. It's easy to praise God in those good days but what about the days when life is tough? How do you praise God when life is hard and difficult?

Isaiah gives us a clue. For him, he reflected on what he knew that the Lord had done for him. He knew that God had already clothed him with salvation and placed a robe of righteousness on his shoulders. In other word, he was confident that God had saved his lost soul and had given him a righteous standing in His eyes. He knew His soul was eternally safe in the hands of God and that God had made him acceptable.

Everyone has to go through times that are like cold, barren winter months where we have to endure weariness and struggle. That is life. But spring is coming. And even when your life seems like barren soil, God promises to bring forth new life in you like a spring planted garden.

**Tim Detellis ... God's promises are true. Whether you are skipping through good times or plodding through a difficult season, you can trust God's faithfulness will prevail. He is with you through it all, and He will make sure what He has sown within you will spring forth in its time.**

**Philippians 1:6 (NLT)** ...*“And I am sure that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on that day when Christ Jesus comes back again.”*

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***Lord, thank You for sending rainy days. Help me to praise You at all times, even when it storms. You have planned my day. You have promised to make the bad and the good to be good for me. I trust You Lord. I praise You for hearing my prayers and answering them. No one can take care of me the way that You do. Thank you Lord!***

***Pastor Randy Green***

## Let's Go!

Psalm 122:1

*"I was glad when they said unto me,  
"Let us go into the house of the Lord."*

I shared in my devotional from this past Saturday that we at Harvest Fellowship are actively making plans for resuming our on-site worship service.

Pastor Randy has been engaged in conference calls and zoom meetings with state and even national Southern Baptist leadership. We are reviewing and assessing various suggestions from our SBC of Virginia state convention, all the while respecting the guidelines currently in place as part of the "Forward Virginia: Phase One" presented by the governor.

So one day, hopefully and prayerfully very soon, we will be able to say:

*"Let us go into the house of the Lord."*

Our leadership team will be meeting this weekend to work out the details of just what a re-opening worship service will look like and the necessary adjustments we will all need to make in order to gather together safely and responsibly.

But that's all nuts and bolts stuff... the real question is can you say with the Psalmist;

*"I was **glad** when they said to me,  
"Let us go to the house of the Lord." (NASB)*

Some translations read:

*"I **rejoiced** with those who said to me," (NIV)  
"Let us go to the house of the Lord."*

*"I was **happy** when they said to me,  
"Let's go to the Temple of the Lord." (NCV)*

And I especially like this one:

*"I was **overjoyed** when they said,  
"Let's go up to the house of the Lord." (TPT)*

"Glad, rejoicing, happy, overjoyed..." all words that describe an anticipation of a very positive experience.

The Hebrew word used here, "samah" is defined as:  
*"to be glad, delight in, be elated, i.e., to have a feeling or attitude of joy and happiness, with a possible focus of making an outward expression of that joy"*

Yep, that sounds about like what I'm looking forward to! As much as we have appreciated our stuffed-animal congregation these past weeks, it will be really good to see some real live folks joining us in worship in *"an outward expression of that joy."*

Pastor Randy shared with me this week that someone had said to him recently that they were: *"anxious* to get back in church."

Of course Randy knew what that person meant; that he was, like most of us, ready, excited, even "antsy" to get back to meeting together as our Harvest Fellowship family. Anxious anticipation of: *"a feeling or attitude of joy and happiness, with a possible focus of making an outward expression of that joy."*

But we all have to realize that there are also some people who are also *"anxious"* about getting back in church. Yeah, that other kind of *"anxious."*



That “anxious” the dictionary defines as:

*“full of mental distress or uneasiness because of fear of danger or misfortune; greatly worried.”*

As we have seen all along, even after almost 3 months of dealing with COVID-19, there is still so much that is unknown about this viral pandemic. By now we have probably all heard of, or know of someone who may have had or tested positive for the virus. Or we may know some who are pretty sure they have had it and either were not tested, or actually tested negative.

It is no wonder that this uncertainty can lead to uneasiness or even anxiety for many. For others the simple desire to “err on the side of caution” is the personal protocol they are choosing to follow.

The bottom line is that different people are in different places when it comes to being ready to return to a corporate worship service experience. As Randy will share in his message this week (spoiler alert) the main thing is that we continue to love each other wherever we may be in this respect.

Yeah, I’m anxious to get back to worshiping together also. But I want people to be glad, happy... overjoyed even when we say;

*“Hey, Let’s go to the house of the Lord!”*

*-Pastor Ronnie Bunch*

# Lift Our Leaders

1 Timothy 2:1-2

America is weird.

I say that as someone who deeply loves this country. I was fortunate to be in Boy Scouts for several years, moving from Cub Scouts all the way through Eagle Scout. Along the way I learned a lot about loving my country, respecting the flag, and how we came to be. I like history, so that helps.

I also find myself reading about leaders and the weight of decisions that burden them, when no course of action seems right. No matter what decision they made they were going to face severe criticism. In many cases the true wisdom of their decision would not be realized and accepted until years, sometimes decades, later, in many cases after they had died and the long-term effects of their decisions played out more fully.

I think this is where we are right now. With this COVID-19 pandemic, everything is new. Nothing like this has been seen in over 100 years and even then we did not understand germ theory the way we do now, so the directions and precautions we are given have changed and progressed over the years. And the politics aren't helping.

Now, more than ever it seems, we need to pray for our leaders.

**1Tim 2:1-2--** *I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people-- for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.*

I'm about to get real personal with these two questions:

1. Do you pray for ALL leaders, or just the ones on your side?
2. If you pray for leaders that oppose your ideology, what do you pray for?

Before you get too offended, let me admit up front that I have a tendency to pray for the leaders I like more, for protection and wisdom and good things. For the leaders on the other side, however, I tend to pray for them to be replaced or to face some kind of judgment.

Praying for your enemies (or in politics, "enemies") is not easy or natural. But it IS necessary.

Every leader needs the wisdom and direction of God. If you need God's direction in your life, imagine the direction that world leaders need in theirs! As someone has said, "The problem with being a leader in today's world is that you can't be sure whether people are following you or chasing you."

Here are some people to consider praying for God to guide in wisdom and to give the courage to speak the truth so both they and we can make wise decisions:

1. Global doctors and health organization leaders. We are still trying to get a handle on this disease and as new info is discovered, decisions need to be made quickly and correctly. Pray for CDC, WHO, NIAID, Dr. Fauci, Dr. Birx, Dr. Adams, and any local doctors and nurses you know.
2. Global and national political leaders. President Trump, VP Pence, VP Biden (possible future president), Speaker Pelosi, any Senators and Representatives you can think of, specifically in your state.
3. State assembly delegates, your state's Governor, and your state's Department of Health Director. Pray for state and local hospitals and their decision-makers and boards as they make decisions about opening and continuing care.
4. Local governments, county officials, public servants, mayors, boards and councils, judges and law enforcement officers who have to personally handle laws and orders.

One final thing: consider praying for the press, the ones who pass on the information to the people. They have a difficult job and may pass on partial stories, twisted stories or fully true stories, but it does not come without opposition, whichever way they do it. The press includes national correspondants, global correspondants, medical reporters, political reporters, editors, local journalists and freelance journalists.

I want to encourage you to respond to this whole pandemic with faith, but also with action. Actions will include all the stuff you're told to do: social distance, wash your hands, wear a mask, be wise about going out, etc. But action also includes prayer. Be active in your prayer for the decision-makers all over the world, in our nation and locally, so that their hearts are soft to God and to people, but also so that they grasp new information, process it correctly, make wise decisions (whether we like them or not), and move us forward.

Your church leaders also definitely need your prayers. Your pastors and leadership team, your Bible study leaders and convention leaders are trying to make wise decisions on how Harvest is to continue to respond. We know we are being prayed for and we appreciate it. We look forward to seeing everyone together in person again.

*Lord, thank you for hearing my prayers. Thank you for the privilege of calling you Father. Please keep our leaders on my heart, that I will be diligent in praying for them, for those I know and those I don't, for those I agree with and those I don't, for those I love and those I don't really get along with. You have placed them in office by your good pleasure and have directed me to lift them up to you. We all need your grace and wisdom. Guard my heart so that I grow in love for our leaders and entrust them to you, the God of All Things. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# More Than Just A Game!

Luke 19:15-17

I heard many years ago from an old bird hunter that if a man gets one good bird dog in his life, he's a blessed man. Really good bird dogs are hard to find and very expensive if you buy one. I am fortunate that I have had several. They were all different and special in their own right. The best dog I have ever had is the one I am growing old with right now. She is a 95 pound lab. Her name is Izzy. Joyce named her and I trained her. She is my best dog not because she is a great hunter even though she tries and thinks she is. She is my favorite because we have been developing our special relationship from the first day I met her. Our bond is hard to describe. I can honestly say that Izzy lives to please me. She is amazingly tuned in to everything I am doing to see what she can do to make me happy. Through the years we have had several games that we play together. They are fun games to me but she has a purpose in everyone we play together. She wants my approval.

She loves to go to the back door and look for squirrels. They like to come and eat our bird feed. Izzy loves to chase them back into the woods. She runs them away and goes and lays back on the porch and the squirrels quickly return to the feeders. They know she can't catch them. She really doesn't want too! Again, she only chases them because she thinks that makes me happy and it does.

Tuesday morning she was standing at the back door with her old eyes focused on some squirrels at the feeder. She looked up at me as if to say ... ***Open the door and I'll get-um!*** So I opened the door slowly and she waited for me to say ... ***Catch-um!*** As fast as she could run ... down the steps she ran with squirrels scattering everywhere. As they disappeared into the woods ... she stopped at the feeder and looked back in my direction. She stopped to check to see if I was watching ... and to hear

me say ... ***Good job Izzy!***

It's a game of fun for me to watch the squirrels run for their lives ... but for Izzy it's more than just a game. It's her way of gaining my approval. She lives to make me happy!

**Q ... What do you live for?**

**Luke 19:15-17 (NLT) ... "When he returned, the king called in the servants to whom he had given the money. He wanted to find out what they had done with the money and what their profits were. [16] The first servant reported a tremendous gain—ten times as much as the original amount! [17] 'Well done!' the king exclaimed. 'You are a trustworthy servant. You have been faithful with the little I entrusted to you, so you will be governor of ten cities as your reward.'"**

Notice the very first thing that Jesus will say upon His return to those who have been good stewards of His blessings. While you may have served in a quiet and often unseen way, Jesus will reward you with public recognition. The Master will take a moment and make a public announcement ... ***"Well done my faithful servant!"***

When you show up at the judgment seat of Christ, trust me, there will be nothing like hearing Jesus say, ***"Good job!"***

**Tony Evans ... *You may be hidden away in your work, but if you do what God has called you to do faithfully and consistently, you will be honored before all of heaven on that day.***

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***Lord, help us to live our lives focused on doing what pleases You the most and brings You glory! Thank You for the opportunity.***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# Masks, right?

Mark 7:6

Yesterday in Staten Island, New York, there was a shopper in a grocery store who didn't wear a mask when she came in. The entire store turned on her and yelled at her, calling her all sorts of filthy names.

For not wearing a mask.

Masks are a big deal right now, am I right?

Should I wear one or not? Should other people wear them? Should we be required to wear them? What do they have to look like? What kind does it have to be? Do they really work? Do I wear one so I don't get sick or so I don't get other people sick? If it's not required, should I wear one? Do I have to wear them outside or just inside?

People have a lot of questions about masks and they have a lot of opinions about masks, and it's getting to the point that opinions better not differ... or else.

Jesus had something to say about masks, too:

**Mark 7:6--** *He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."*

You may be thinking, "Are you calling me a hypocrite for not wearing a mask?!"

No, you're a hypocrite if you DO wear a mask.

Hang on, that didn't come out right. Let me back up. The word hypocrite is often taken to mean someone who says one thing but does something else. By that definition we are all hypocrites. But it's also a vast oversimplification of what a hypocrite is.

The real meaning of the word hypocrite is "insincere" and refers to an actor playing a part, a pretender. In Greek theater, rather than having a large cast of actors, they would have a small cast, often just one or two people. In their hands they would hold ceramic masks on stick handles and would put the character's mask over their face, speaking his lines, then switch masks to speak the other character's lines. This would let the audience know who was speaking.

When Jesus calls out the religious leaders for being hypocrites he is saying, "You're insincere! You're just wearing masks and speaking lines that you know people expect to hear from you, but that's all it is: an act! You don't really believe it because you don't really live in a way that reflects your public belief!"

All through Matthew 23 Jesus calls out the leaders for their hypocrisy, calling them dirty cups (clean on the outside, but nasty on the inside) and whitewashed tombs filled with dead men's bones (clean and white on the outside, but still just a place where a dead man resides). I

encourage you to go and read that. He paints a pretty bleak picture. Go ahead. I'll wait.

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Don't skimp. Go read it. Seriously.

Do you get the picture? Jesus has an opinion on masks and his opinion is pretty clear: he doesn't like them.

By now I hope you understand that I'm not talking about the N95 or homemade or paper masks everyone is talking about. Your opinion on that can shift and change and you can do what you feel is best.

What Jesus is talking about is the masks that people wear to fulfill a role they are expected to play. We all have expectations of other people and wish they would wear a mask for our own comfort, and we all wear masks to hide who we really are from others as a way to protect ourselves.

Neither is best.

The church is filled with broken people, just like the world is. We are not less broken; we don't struggle less; our lives are not inherently better; we are just granted a different access to the Father's grace because we give Him a chance to do something about us. Everyone has the opportunity to reach out to God, to call on Him, to receive His grace, but not everyone will.

The problem with masks is that (a) we don't let people know we struggle so we end up struggling alone, and (b) we get into the habit of wearing a mask before God, too. Our prayers, even in private, can become shallow conversations with God instead of a full revelation of who we are and what we need. We hide just like Adam and Eve, whose first instinct after their sin, was to cover.

The poor woman in the store had her own reason for deciding not to wear a mask. No one knew her story or her reasons, but they didn't ask, either. They just called her out on not wearing one because her perspective was wrong and theirs was right. Or something.

Jesus gives us a reason not to wear a mask. He DOES know our story and he DOES want us to tell it because that gives us a chance to tell HIS story, too.

If we all begin removing our masks the story of Jesus can go... well... viral.

*Lord, thank you for seeing me as I really am and loving me here and now. Thank you for giving me the chance to remove my mask so that I can share your story of work in my life. Help me overcome my fear and anxiety, help me break free of playing a role, pretending to be someone I'm not so that you can be glorified as a healer and a redeemer of the broken. I love you, Jesus. Amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Mayday!

*John 10:10*

Happy May Day!

Is that the right way to say that? Are we supposed to wish each other happy May Day, like we say merry Christmas? I'm not sure. Maybe you're not either. In America we don't celebrate May Day.

Let me back up. May 1 has a long and storied history. For thousands of years it has been celebrated as the Celtic holiday called Beltane, the midpoint of the year, the day which celebrates the difference between light and darkness. On Beltane, or May Day, the return of fertility and life to the world was celebrated. When the Romans took over the British Isles they merged their own celebration of Floralia, the worship festival of the goddess of fertility, Flora. The May Day celebrations began to involve dancing around the maypole in a colorful clothes with ribbons and streamers.

In 1884 it was on May 1 that trade unions met in Chicago to declare that an eight-hour workday was the acceptable standard, to begin on May 1, 1886. Two years later 300,000 people walked out of their jobs in protest to unfair working conditions. Two days later, on May 3, police and protesters clashed at what was called the Haymarket Affair, pushing toward both communism and the acceptance of fair labor practices.

You may be more familiar with it as a distress call. When the radio began to be a standard piece of equipment on ships, they needed a distress call that would be easy to understand over a crackling radio. Someone suggested "m'aider!", (pronounced may' day) which is French for "come help me." It was quickly accepted and promoted.

Why all the history on May Day? First, I love history and am a fount of useless information. You're welcome. But second, everything that May Day is about is actually found in Jesus! While the Celts and communists don't recognize Jesus, you do.

**John 10:10--** *I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance.*

While the Celts and Romans celebrate a pagan understanding of new life, in Christ we actually HAVE new life. In the above verse Jesus says that is the reason he came. He came to give you new life. New life means a life unlike the one you already had. He didn't say he came to enhance your life or to make it cooler or more fun. He said he came to give you NEW LIFE! This is a whole different life.

In the May Day celebration, they look back on the cold, dark, dreary fall and winter, but they look ahead to the bright, warm spring and summer. They recognize the life that lay ahead, the opportunities, the generosity that awaits them. Can you say the same for your life in Christ? Do you look at the contrast of what Jesus has done and what he offers, to what you had before: doubt,

fear, hopelessness, a void of... something, whatever it was that led you to consider Christ in the first place?

Look at the Haymarket Affair. The reason labor unions were formed was in recognition that there was more to life than working long hours in bad conditions. Can you imagine being a child working 15-16 hours a day in a hot factory, going home with barely a contribution to the family income, going to bed and waking up for another day, every day, exactly the same? What kind of life is that? Laborers decided that enough was enough! They knew there was more to life.

Jesus said the same thing! He came to give you ABUNDANT life! Life that is full. A rich life with goals and purpose led by God, the God who knows you, sees you, calls you by name and walks beside you to fulfill what you were created for. Even the best boss can't do that, but Jesus can. And he came for that!

Finally, the distress call. Jesus said, *Ask it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks the door will be opened (Matt 7:7-8).*

When you call out to Jesus in a time of distress, or even if it's not a time of distress, he answers. He meets your need. He heeds the call and is already at work rescuing you. Part of the abundant life is the knowledge that God's ear is bent toward you. That's right, the God of the universe, creator of all things, hears you and responds.

So let me ask you, are you still mired in the cold and dark of your winter? Do you feel like no one hears you when you call? Do you feel like there's more to your life than you are living right now? This is the time to talk to Jesus.

Take advantage of May Day, in all its forms, to look forward to the new life Jesus gives, to cry out to him, and to begin living life the way you were meant to live it. Jesus came to give you a new, full life! As new life is blooming all around you, call on God so that it will bloom in you as well.

*Thank you, Lord, for offering me new life. Thank you that I can see your faithfulness all around me in the way you once again cause flowers to bloom, trees to turn green, and birds to hatch a new generation. I know you offer that and more to me. Give me the life that I need from you, be my help and help me break free from the darkness of the past into the light of new life in you. Amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**



# More Than Practice

1 Thess 1:3

How do you practice your faith? What I mean is, when your faith is in practice, what does it look like?

I like the term practice when it comes to careers, not just training for an event. Doctors call their work a "practice", as do most people in the healthcare or mental healthcare fields. They realize it's not just a business, but is something you are always learning as new discoveries are made. That's why they have residencies and supervised training and huge tests before they can open their own practice. As has been said by many, "Practice doesn't make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect."

My father played golf since he was a young man. He would go every once in a while and he started taking me when I was a young teen and we would go sometimes, not often. He had a bad slice, which is when the ball would curve right. It's supposed to go mostly straight, with a bit of a curve to the left. Since he didn't know how to correct it on his own, he began lining his feet up to the left so the ball would begin landing in the fairway. So when he taught me to play golf and I had the same problem, guess how he taught me to correct for it.

When he was getting close to 70 he decided to take golf lessons. He hired a pro, played a lot of golf, and learned how to stand and swing correctly, learned how to feel

what it was like when he was on or off and to correct for it, and had clubs fit specifically to him. Of course he became a much better golfer because of it.

**1Thess. 1:3--** *We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

In writing to the church at Thessalonica, Paul commended them for three things:

1. Their work produced by faith,
2. Their labor prompted by love,
3. Their endurance inspired by hope

In trying to understand the difference between work and labor, since they are often interchanged in our language, I found out that "work" (from the Greek, *ergon*) referred to undertaking of the task, something that occupies your time. "Labor", on the other hand (Greek, *kopos*) refers to trouble, as in the intense trouble and toil and grief taken on to complete a task.

Of course "endurance" (Greek, *hypomone*) refers to someone "unswerved from their purpose" or who is constant in their effort.

In other words, Paul's commendation to the church is that he knows three things about them:

1. Because of their faith, they spend their time taking on tasks to expand the kingdom and spread the gospel,

2. Because of their love, they toil and take on headaches to do what needs to be done for others,
3. Because of their hope in Christ, they are constant in their efforts, unswerved from their purpose.

We individually often have one or two of these, but it takes practice to garner all three. Anyone can have solid faith for a while and anyone can do the occasional work of caring for others for a time and anyone can work in hope for a while, but doing all three for years on end can be very difficult.

We have a friend who had two children already and got pregnant again unexpectedly when she was in the category of "advanced maternal age." She wasn't old, but because of her age she was considered a high-risk patient. At one point they found out that her daughter was going to be born with Down Syndrome and for several reasons some were advising her to abort her child. She put a stop to that real quick and has raised her daughter and her other children as a single mom after the death of her husband by cancer. She knows her daughter will live with her for the rest of her life and she wouldn't have it any other way. It's a lot of work with no end in sight and she's happy to do it for the privilege of being her mom.

That seems like a different issue altogether and in a way it is, but our commitment to the work of God can be met with the same attitude. We don't have to take on a lifetime of ministry, we just have to decide to do God's work today, at this next opportunity.

In training for and running triathlons, I learned not to worry about what the next leg was going to be like, but just to focus on my swim, then I focused on getting dressed like I had practiced, then cycling in the moment, then on feeling the run. It could and would get overwhelming to think of all that came next, so I just had to focus on the task at hand.

That's what brings endurance. Like the Thessalonian church, let your faith spur you on to do good works, let your love prompt you to take on the bother of caring for others and let your hope in Christ give you the endurance to serve God and others one task at a time.

*Lord God, thank you for allowing me to be a part of your kingdom and for inviting me to share in the work of expanding it. Thank you for working in me so that you can draw others to yourself through me. Forgive me for whining about doing your work and help me to look for opportunities to serve you by serving others. Let your love shine through me, give me the faith to guide me and help me build the endurance to carry on as you lead me. In the Name of Jesus, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# That's not the Christ I know.

*Matthew 11:1-3*

We like to watch movies.

Heather and I have watched a ton of movies from the time we started dating all the way through today. Part of that is that we love stories. The other part is that we can watch movies for cheap. Not having much money, we would go to the dollar movie theater to see movies that had been out for a couple of months, but weren't quite ready to be released on video.

That's when going to the movies was fun because it was a surprise. You would see a trailer for the movie, maybe read a review or two in the paper and you might even have a friend who had seen it.

Nowadays it's not as much fun as it was. The internet has a lot to do with it. People analyze the movie before it's released, gripe about who was cast in some role that belonged to someone else and, most importantly, would complain that the movie wasn't like the book.

John the Baptist had the same problem. The movie about the Christ didn't line up with the book about the Christ.

**Matthew 11:1-3--** *When Jesus had finished giving instructions to his twelve disciples, he moved on from there to teach and preach in their towns. Now when John heard in prison what the Christ was doing, he sent a message through his disciples and asked him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"*

John was in prison for calling out a political leader's poor behavior. He would soon be executed and he wanted to know if his life of pointing people to Jesus had been the right choice. Honestly you can't blame him. He had spent his whole life serving God, being told that he would prepare the way for the Messiah, who happened to be his cousin.

Now John was in prison and Jesus was teaching love and peace and repentance, which is different than what people were expecting of the Messiah. The Messiah, the Christ, was supposed to sort out who was righteous and who wasn't. He was supposed to restore Israel the Jews. Some thought he was going to be a military leader who would lead a revolt and expel the Romans and rule over Israel righteously.

Who knows what all John believed? He had grown up in Israel and had heard all the stories about who the Christ was supposed to be. Did Jesus resemble the stories everyone, including John, had heard, or was he not at all what they were expecting?

In prison John had a lot of time to think. Maybe he was hearing stories from the outside, stories of what Jesus was teaching or of the healings he was doing.

Read the next few verses of Matthew 11, however, and see how Jesus responded. He said to tell John about what they were seeing, about the healing, about the teaching. Jesus was telling John he had been right all along. Everything John had been telling people about the Messiah was true, and Jesus encouraged him in his faith.

When we are in a low point we tend to do the same thing, don't we? We question God's story when it doesn't line up with our expectations. A lot of people have an idea of how Jesus should be and when he doesn't fit our expectation, we doubt if he really is who he says is. It often doesn't occur to us that our mind needs to be changed as to who he is or how he does things.

How are you about changing your mind? When you find out something new about Jesus do you say, there's no way? Or do you say, "Well, that's something I didn't know."

David Jeremiah says, "We cannot worship that which fits comfortably in our conceptions." In other words, if God is small enough that we can understand him, he's not someone worthy of our worship. The very fact that he's bigger than we can grasp, is one of the reasons to bow before him.

The next time you find yourself in a dark place, a place of doubt, a prison of sorts, rather than doubting God's identity, point to his work to confirm it. When John asked Jesus if he was who he says he is, Jesus pointed him to all the works he was doing that supported his claim. Maybe that's a good way to remember who Jesus is: by looking at all he's done already.

*Jesus, thank you for allowing me to see your works.  
Thank you that when I doubt who you are, I can still see  
what you're doing. Give me eyes to see so that I will have  
a heart that still believes in the one who saved me. Amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

## Numbered Days

Psalm 90:12

“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain  
a heart of wisdom.”

“His days are numbered...”

Usually, when we hear this phrase spoken our minds go to someone who is nearing the end of their life. It may be a person who has lived a long, full life, or it may be that one who lives in such a reckless manner that they could “go at any moment.”

But the truth is, none of us can know how many days we have left on this earth. In this time of viral pandemic uncertainty many have come to appreciate just what a treasure each day is.

I shared an article written by an archeologist about 2 months ago that began with the statement:

“I am an unforeseen outcome of a global pandemic.”

In the article the writer told of her great-grandmother who chose to be with her husband as he was dying with the Spanish Flu during the epidemic in 1918. The great-grandmother succumbed to the flu as well, and likewise died leaving two daughters to be raised by relatives.

The two young girls, Helen, age 4 and one year old Ruth were shared between relatives who all fought over the inheritance and sold the nice house and all the nice things inside. Ruth

ended up in a decent home with her father’s family, while Helen was shunted from relative’s house to relative’s house, facing horrid abuse and mistreatment.

The writer tells how her grandmother Helen never gave up and actually graduated valedictorian of her high school class and eventually married an army lieutenant during World War II. From this marriage came the author’s mother.

As she pondered her great-grandmother’s decision to risk, and even lose her life in order to be with her dying husband she made the statement:

“Without my great-grandmother’s early death, I would not exist. My grandmother might well have grown up cherished and happy with endless suitors at whatever university she could have attended as the daughter of a successful middle-class family in Boston.”

When I read this article a couple of months ago I pondered my own story as I shared a couple of old family photos. This first one is of my great-grandparents:



And this is a photo of my grandmother: (in the tree)



There is one that I didn't include in that earlier post however. This is a photograph of my sister, Beverly Anne Bunch at three months old:



I never knew my sister because she died before I was born. She had form of lymphoma which now has a cure rate of better than 90%, but not so in the mid 1950s.

But had she not died, I would not have been. After Beverly was born as their second child, my parents felt that with a son (my older brother Smithy) and a daughter the family was complete.

As I shared earlier; it was because my great-grandparents and my grandmother survived the Spanish Flu that I am here. But it is also because my sister did not survive Wilm's lymphoma that I am here.

God's Word tells us through the prophet Jeremiah:  
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you..." (Jer 1:5)

*"Before..." not "when..."*

The creator of the universe knew me *before* I even was. Before my sister no longer was. Before my grandmother posed in a hollow tree. (During or shortly after a pandemic)

The Psalmist reminds us that:  
"...all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be." (Psalm 139:16)

"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain  
a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:12)

The CEV translates this verse as:  
"Teach us to use wisely all the time we have."

Because none of us know just how much "time we have."

The archeologist writer of the article closed with this statement:

“The message of my great-grandparents' story is identical to the message that thousands of distinct ancient cultures show with their archaeological remains: We lived, and we loved, for as long as we could. Long may we love, knowing there will be, no matter what, unforeseen outcomes for our children, and for the descendants we cannot imagine.”

During this ongoing time of seeming uncertainty may we indeed live and love, and “use wisely the time we have.” Realizing that we serve a God who has already ordained all of our days... and the days of our children, and our children’s children, and generations to come that we cannot even begin to imagine.

*-Pastor Ronnie Bunch*

# True Hope

Proverbs 13:12

Many in our world right now have very little hope. There are those who are struggling and desperate for help. I had a man call me late one night this week desperately needing to talk to me because he knew I was a pastor and he trusted me. He is a distraught father who is desperate for help with a rebellious son. I spent well over an hour on the phone listening and then trying to help this father make some good decisions moving forward. I was trying to give him some hope. His is not an easy problem to fix because this relational storm has been building up for a long time.

***Charles Stanley ... When you pray for some change or blessing for a long time, the delay can be disheartening, especially when the circumstances don't go your way or your burdens get heavier. And in the midst of your waiting times, even greater challenges may arise that make it seem as if hope is gone and lost forever. That has a way of wearing on even the strongest faith ... especially when the blessing is so important and the delays are so extensive.***

Everyone needs hope. But honestly, hope is hard to find apart from the Lord. I don't know what you need and are waiting for today, but I am sure that you will be far better prepared and able if your life and focus is fixed on the Lord. He needs to be the one you focus on ... not your problem. Here's why ... you see, when you spend all your time and energy focused on what you lack or need ... despair can take root in your heart. You can grow frustrated and you can become obsessed over your lack of ability to fix your situation. That my friend only leads to more pain and frustration in your own life. The more frustrated you become ... the more tempted you will be to try to fix things in your own strength and in your own way rather than letting God help you in His way and in His timing.

If you want a good example of what I am talking about, just read Genesis 16 and you will see taking that strategy never goes well!

If you want to experience true hope, then you have to realize that it can never be based on a desired outcome. Dr. Stanley says that ***true hope***

***is absolute confidence in God's unfailing character and ability, regardless of your circumstances.*** Most of us try to fix our problems in our own strength and with our own plans and only when we fail, do we turn to the Lord for help. Why not reverse that and try God first. He has incredible strength and power and wisdom. And as a child of God, that is all available to you. Your situations never surprise or overwhelm God. He is your true hope!

***Isaiah 41:10 (NLT) ... "Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."***

***Philippians 4:11b-13 (NLT) ... "I have learned how to get along happily whether I have much or little. [12] I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. [13] For I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need."***

... God knows everything we need even before we ask ...  
... He especially knows what is best for us ...  
... and He loves to bless us!

***Hebrews 12:1-3 (NLT) ... "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. [2] We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish. He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy he knew would be his afterward. Now he is seated in the place of highest honor beside God's throne in heaven. [3] Think about all he endured when sinful people did such terrible things to him, so that you don't become weary and give up."***

My friends, there are a lot of things in this life that you can hope for, but **Jesus** is the only sure hope that exist! Don't wait to try Him last ... try Him now and trust Him.



*Father, we live in a fast pace world that teaches us to want what we want when we want it. Help us to look to You as our true source of hope. Teach us to go to You first with all our cares. Thank You for being there for us. Help us trust You and grow our little faith. In Jesus name, Amen!*

*Pastor Randy Green*

## Pray!

Romans 12:12 (NIV)

*“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”*

On April 17, 1952, President Harry Truman signed a bill proclaiming the National Day of Prayer into law in the United States. President Reagan amended the law in 1988, designating the first Thursday of May each year as the National Day of Prayer.

On this first Thursday in May we join with believers all across American in observance of the National Day of Prayer 2020. This year in particular we have much to pray about and for.

Two months ago, on March 7<sup>th</sup>, Virginia reported the first confirmed case of COVID-19. Since then we have all been *affected* in one way or another by the Coronavirus pandemic. Thankfully relatively very few have been *infected*, and we pray that trend continues.

We can in fact be *“joyful in hope”* as more encouraging reports are being presented. Many states are reopening aspects of their economy and trying to return to some sense of normalcy.

So we try to remain *“patient in affliction”* - realizing that some have been “afflicted” much more than others.

But most importantly we should be *“faithful in prayer.”*

Here is a guide that you can use as you take the opportunity and privilege - while also recognizing the responsibility - to pray today.



# SBC

## Pray for the Seven Centers of Influence on the National Day of Prayer

How to pray the 2020 theme, *Pray God's Glory Across the Earth*, into the Seven Centers of Influence in America for the National Day of Prayer, May 7, 2020

*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord's glory, as the water covers the sea.*  
Habakkuk 2:14 (CSB)



### GOVERNMENT

- **Federal:** executive, legislative, judicial
- **State:** executive, legislative, judicial
- **Local:** executive, legislative, judicial, police, fire, first responders

*Pray for these leaders and civil servants to do all in their power to show the glory of God every day as they work to serve our nation. Pray for wisdom in all matters related to COVID-19, and the major national and global challenges they address daily. Pray that God will work in them and through them. Ask God for a great spiritual awakening in the United States.*



### MILITARY

- Courageous and wise leaders
- God's protection
- Continual dependence on God

*Pray for the protection of the leaders and personnel serving our nation through the military and for them to use every opportunity that they are presented to exhibit the glory of God across our nation and around the globe.*



### MEDIA ARTS

- Communicators of truth
- Sharing inspirational stories
- Respecting others

*Pray for each person working in the media and arts professions to find new ways to use their talents and technology to fill the airwaves with the glory of God.*



### BUSINESS

- Leaders of honesty and integrity
- Creators of economic blessing
- Helpers and givers to local community

*Pray for the business leaders of America to show the glory of God as they work together to reopen the economy of the United States, and for financial blessing and prosperity to return. Pray for supernatural understanding of what is needed for a safe return to business. Pray that God receives all the glory in our businesses.*



### EDUCATION

- Highly values truth
- Expects excellence
- Prepares students to win

*Pray for the administrators, teachers, and other faculty teams who are working even now to continue educating their students remotely. Pray that God will use them to exhibit His glory through them to their students in this time of social distancing.*



### CHURCH

- Biblically-based, Christ-centered
- Holy Spirit-empowered
- Great Commission-driven

*Pray for the churches of our nation to show wisdom and discernment as they begin preparations to reopen their church buildings. Pray for churches to live out the Great Commission in their neighborhoods and around the world. Pray that the glory of God will fill churches across the nation in a new and fresh way.*



### FAMILY

- Follow the Bible
- Practice forgiveness
- Love one another

*Pray for families as many across the nation and the world continue sheltering at home. Pray that families will be drawn closer together and closer to God during this time. Pray for those facing unemployment and for their financial needs to be met. Pray for God's glory to be shown through the strengthening of families in our nation.*



### Pray for the COVID-19 Global Pandemic

- Ask God, in His mercy, to stop this pandemic and save lives—not only in our communities, but around the world, particularly in places that are unequipped medically to deal with this virus.
- Ask God to grant us wisdom in this moment of fear as the foundations of what we know are shaken, that others would realize how fragile life is and how real eternity is, and that would see their need to turn to God.
- Ask God to protect our missionaries and their families around the world, and that this moment would be used to advance the Good News in every town, every city, every state, and every nation.
- Ask God for a medical breakthrough and for researchers to develop a vaccine for COVID-19.

# The Promise Of His Presence

Psalm 43:3-4

**Psalm 43:3-4 (NLT) ...“Send out your light and your truth; let them guide me. Let them lead me to your holy mountain, to the place where you live. [4] There I will go to the altar of God, to God—the source of all my joy. I will praise you with my harp, O God, my God!”**

Saturday I was working in my garden. We decided to plant a garden this year. The vegetables might come in handy. We’ve always loved fresh peas, squash and corn. Planting a garden is hard work especially if you haven’t plowed your garden in years. It will take a lot of hard work just getting it ready to plant. I’ve plowed it twice now trying to get all the grass and weeds out of the soil.

As I was plowing Saturday, the thought came to my mind that the last time I planted a garden my mother was alive. When she was still living, she would go to the feed store in Panama City and buy me a special pea seed that you can’t buy up here in Virginia. They are called White Acre Peas. They are an old variety of seed. They were getting hard to find years ago ... so when she could find them ... she would send me several pounds at a time and we would put them in the freezer. We looked the other day and we may have ten pounds or more of these seed. So I planted a few just to see if they were any good. Everyone I planted came up! Honestly, we have enough seed for several years of planting. I am sure if Mom was still alive, I would be getting a call wanting to know if I needed some more seed. But Mom’s gone home to live in the eternal presence of Almighty God. She’s where I dream of going ... into God’s literal presence.

Right now, through of the work of the Holy Spirit and the truth of God’s Word, I am able to come into God’s presence as I worship Him. Following the truth of God’s precious Word results in a life of worship. It helps me to live the kind of life that glorifies God. The psalmist had a heart that desired to follow God’s guidance which led him to go humbly into the presence of God to fellowship with Him and to worship Him.

These verses also speak of an even more profound truth. When people are receptive of the gospel light, which is the gospel truth of Jesus Christ, they are ushered into the direct presence of God. He gives us forgiveness and eternal life and the Holy Spirit comes to live in us. While we live on earth, we get to fellowship with God through His Spirit. But one day, just like my Mother and Father, I will with a whole host of other believers get to arrive at the very dwelling place of God. We will all be home then together again in our eternal home called heaven. What joy that promise brings me now! Can you imagine the joy we will experience then!!!!

I hope you have already made preparation to spend eternity in Heaven. But if you have not, I want to encourage you to put your faith in Jesus Christ and trust Him to make you right with God. Invite Him to come into your life as your Lord and Savior. If you will do that, He will guide you through life while here on earth and one day He will take you home to dwell in His literal presence forever.

~~~~~  
Father, thank you for making salvation possible for us through Your Son Jesus Christ. Lord, I pray that you will help anyone who reads this devotional, that isn’t saved, to trust Jesus with their soul. Please draw them into Your presence with Your eternal grace.
Thank You Lord!

Pastor Randy Green

Timing is Everything

Psalm 37:7-8

How many movies have you seen in which the villains grow rich, avoid justice and beat the system? Obviously in movies the resolution is usually the comeuppance of the villain. The law finally catches up, the vigilante brings him to justice, the superspy brings him to his ultimate demise...

But real life doesn't usually work like the movies.

Surprise!

Often we spend our whole careers watching someone we work with, or work under, handle themselves poorly, cheat coworkers or customers or the company and get promoted.

When I was in Texas going to seminary one of the jobs I had was as a model home host for a local homebuilder. Their company had done very well in southern Fort Worth and the suburbs in the south and east of the city. They had just opened a subdivision north of the city and it was mostly empty lots with the exception of four homes being built. Two of the homes were being built side by side, one for a couple who was newly retired and the other was for that wife's parents.

Long story short, the homebuilder was trying to sell homes in that community, but most of their focus was still in their established neighborhoods. As a result, the customers in our neighborhood were often neglected. Because the salesmen were paid by commission, one of the salesmen would poach potential homebuyers from our neighborhood and convince them to build down south. Therefore, his income was very high and the salesman up north struggled to make anything.

Part of the "problem" was that the salesmen followed two different sets of personal values. One held to a strong moral compass and the other lived by a dog-eat-dog ethic.

That situation was not unique and it is easy to get discouraged and to start questioning your own decisions. David warns us against that:

Psalm 37:7-8-- *Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret--it leads only to evil.*

The whole Psalm has a lot to say, these two verses give excellent direction, and that last phrase is dripping with wisdom. *Do not fret--it leads only to evil.* That points to the start of our poor decision-making: fretting.

Worrying. Wringing our hands. Being anxious.

Most of the time our poor decisions come from anxiety that things will not work out for us in at least one of two ways:

1. Correctly, or
2. Timely

We watch those around us coasting through life, even if they work hard, with opportunities falling into their laps while we work and reach and stretch, only to see so many opportunities slip away or just out of reach.

We need to remember that God does not live in time; he lives in eternity. Eternity is not *after* time, it is *outside of* time. Part of what that means is that God does not follow the time table we follow. He doesn't worry about how things will play. He doesn't cross his fingers. It is playing out right now and has already played out. Our needs have already been met even if we don't see them being met yet.

When we worry about our life not playing out the way we would hope we are questioning God's wisdom and his power. We are questioning his authority over all things, when we are reminded repeatedly that God is the god of all things, he maintains order in the heavens and the earth and he knows what we need before we ask.

When David tells us not to fret, not to worry, he is reminding us to trust in all we know about God. When we worry we take matters into our own hands and are likely to do something foolish and dishonoring to the Lord.

Everything will work out in good time. And that's exactly what it is:

The good time.

God's time is the good time to resolve our issue. God's time is the good time to provide an opportunity. God's time is the good time to meet our needs. In short, God's time is the good time to glorify himself through an amazing work in our lives.

If there is something you need to trust God for, give him time to do it in a way you can't possibly do it.

His time is the good time.

It's the best time.

And timing is everything.

Father, thank you that ultimately you will manage justice perfectly. You do not see things the way we do and are not on the clock that we are. Thank you that you are beyond corruption and lead me into what is best. Help me to rest in you and to trust in your goodness rather than pursuing my own self-interest

Pastor Art Stafford

What's the Plan?

Proverbs 16:9 (NLT)

"We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps."

I guess, like most people lately, I have been spending more time on FaceBook than I normally would. It can be a great tool for keeping or catching up with folks, especially during these days of self isolation.

But, as with pretty much anything, one does have to be careful just how much time one spends on FaceBook, or any activity for that matter that might result in idle distraction.

That being said... there can be some pretty humorous stuff that gets posted.

I came across this one satirical proposal of a potential "reopening plan."

"We have a 6 phase plan to reopen the state. The plan will be a phased plan that we will plan to utilize in phases. The phases will be planned and the planning will be phased. We will move quickly and slowly to open but remain closed. We have created a staff of staffers who will plan the phase and planning while phasing their phases."

And that is our reopening plan."

I sometimes wonder if that is what many of our "plans" look like to God. Just so much nonsense and gobblygook.

Now, don't get me wrong, I do believe that planning is very important. We have probably all heard the phrase; "If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail."

And Jesus himself, when instructing the crowds on the need to "count" or "consider the cost" of becoming one of his disciples said:

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'"

Luke 14:28-30 (NIV)

Just yesterday Governor Northam announced that "Phase I" of the "Forward Virginia" plan to reopen our state is to commence Friday May 15th. The information presented in the first slide was this:

Phase I looks like this:

- Safer at home - especially if you are vulnerable
- No social gatherings of more than 10 individuals
- Continued social distancing
- Continued teleworking
- Face coverings recommended in public
- Revised business limitations

But then 2 slides later, with respect to Places of Worship, the **Forward Virginia: Phase One** slide read:

PLACES OF WORSHIP	Drive-in services
	50 percent indoor capacity

(Note: this was the exact wording used in the slides presented by Governor Northam at the press conference - I took screenshots- however it doesn't match what I was able to find on the virginia.gov website.)

So we here at Harvest Fellowship, just like other churches across our state and even around our world, are “making plans” to reopen our building for worship. We continue to follow the guidelines as presented by our state government, vague as they may sometimes seem, yet want to be responsibly ready when we can once again join together in corporate worship.

When will that be...? Well, we still don’t know for sure, but it obviously will not be tomorrow.

Jesus also said in verse 27 of that same passage in Luke 14; *“...whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”*

I read a post from a fellow SBCV Pastor that caused me to think about that verse as it relates to our current situation and how some view the government “allowing” us to gather for worship. Here is what this Pastor said:

“I think we should avoid using language such as what we are “allowed” to do.

Our church is cooperating with the government, not obeying it. I think churches should cooperate with the government in this. What’s been asked of us is not unreasonable. Yet. And I hope it doesn’t get to the point of being unreasonable. But if it does, and our church believes we should be meeting, we will meet, regardless of the government’s guidance, instructions, or whatever they plan to call it.”

We, as well as this particular Pastor, are certainly not advocating irresponsible behavior from either a civil or personal health and safety standpoint. But at what point do we need to heed the exhortation from Hebrews 10:

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)

The “Day” is certainly approaching. Whether we are talking about the great and glorious “Day” of Christ’s return, or the day we are finally able to meet together again, it is closer today than it was yesterday!

There is a familiar verse in Jeremiah that we see used a lot around this time of year when many are graduating from High School or College:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

God already had a plan of hope for our future before any of us ever even heard of coronavirus, and the Psalmist reminds us;

*“...the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,
the purposes of his heart through all generations.”*

Psalms 33:11 (NIV)

- Pastor Ronnie Bunch

When the Going Gets Tough...

John 6:66-69

When you read that title you finished the phrase in your head, didn't you? You knew what was next. The phrase is a popular one that has been around for a long time. "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

In this case however, the phrase is different and it can be ended differently, though it's not as catchy. "When the going gets tough, the tough don't get going." Take a look at what Jesus said. I encourage you to read starting at verse 60, or even further back to verse 22.

The passage talks about our motivation for following Jesus. This exchange happens after Jesus feeds the five thousand and then walks on the water (3-4 miles it said!). On the other side of the sea there were already people waiting and they asked Jesus when he got there since he didn't get on the boat with the others. Jesus said, "You're not here because you saw signs of God's work, but because I gave you something to eat." At this point he goes on to talk about bread, then being the bread. Some disciples said it was a hard teaching.

John 6:66-69-- *From that moment many of his disciples turned back and no longer accompanied him. So Jesus*

said to the Twelve, "You don't want to go away too, do you?"

Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

What is the hard teaching that tempts you to stop believing and to turn away? We all have them. We all have things that we wrestle with, that the Bible teaches or that Jesus said or that the Holy Spirit convicts of, that tempt us to stop following Christ. Some do stop following and others acknowledge that there is stuff they don't know, but they have made a commitment.

Our daughter introduced us to a show that we have started watching on and off. The show is called "Nailed It." In short, it is a baking competition between three people (different each episode), who love to bake but are not good at it. They are challenged to recreate a complicated desert while three judges look on. At the end of a round, they reveal their completed dish with a flourish, yelling, "Nailed it!"

Yikes.

One contestant, an adult in his 30s mentioned that he had been dating his girlfriend for 13 years. At one point in the competition he had made a terrible ingredient choice, but instead of starting over when he tasted it and it was awful, he tried to fix it and ride out his horrible idea. He said, "I'm a big fan of commitment."

One judge caught it and said, "YOU'RE a fan of commitment?"

On more than one occasion I have been stunned by the reasons people give for walking away from the faith. Sometimes they begin to believe atheist teaching points, looking for proof in science (which somehow comes across as insufficient evidence). Often, however, they decide it is better to hold their own heart ransom.

"God, if you don't do this for me, I'll never believe in you again."

I had a conversation with one student who said he didn't believe any more and when we talked he said he knew there was some kind of divine being, but it wasn't this one. Big surprise, he was already living a life of pleasure when he told me this. My response was, "So you know there's a God, but it's not the one who has a moral code he will hold you accountable to."

He disagreed of course, but we both knew I was right.

Listen, there are lots of reasons you may consider wandering off. You may be in a rough patch, you may be facing a serious tragedy or trauma. You may think that God should be different than he's revealing himself to be. Maybe you heard a pastor or Bible teacher who taught you a lie and rather than reconsidering that teacher you are reconsidering God.

My encouragement to you is to dig deeper into the Word, not to ignore it. I know it has been hard being people of

faith when we cannot practice our faith as freely and openly right now. We can't show up at church several times a week and get our hugs and coffee and sing with a couple hundred other people. But God was with Paul and Silas in prison and showed his faithfulness. He showed up to the woman at the well who wanted to believe. And he's there with you now.

So if you're struggling with your faith because the teaching is hard or Jesus isn't responding to your whims or because there's stuff you're not willing to give up to follow him, then your best option is to start over. Right where you are, drop your burden and make a choice to say, like Simon Peter, "Where else can I go? I know that you are the Holy One of God."

Father, thank you that you don't answer me in my fickleness. You don't give me everything I want, because I often don't know what's best for me. Thank you that I can call on you even with just a little faith and you will hear me. I know that I will face hardships and will continue to face them throughout my life, but you promise to always be there. Thank you for your faithfulness to me. Help me to always be faithful to you, no matter what. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Work Clothes

John 13:3-4

“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.”

How have you been dressing for work these past few months?

With many people working from home these days, wardrobe selections have gotten pretty casual. We have probably all seen or heard some of the memes or comments having to do with things like: the laborious decision of whether to go with the plaid or solid color flannel lounge pants.

Under normal circumstances, as we dress each morning, we would usually choose what to wear based on what we plan to do that day. If we are “going in to work,” there may be a certain expected or even required dress code, as many of our members of the military can attest to.

People who in the past worked in an office type environment, people in the medical field, first responders, and many other professions often have specific and recognizable attire. There is that old saying - which you may or may not agree with:

“Clothes make the man.”

In other words you can tell a person’s profession, or one might even say social status, just by the type of clothes they wear.

For everyday chores like working in the yard or garden we might put on something more casual or comfortable.

I have my “work on the car” clothes. (Which incidentally Debbie does not even allow in the washing machine with the other dirty clothes - after I have worked on the car they usually end up being just too dirty for that!)

The thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of John records how on the night of his betrayal, as Jesus was about to be arrested and crucified - as he was indeed preparing to “go to work,” he did not dress “up,” but rather “down.”

The passage states;

“He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.” John 13:4

Jesus removed his outer clothing and then, just as a household slave might have done, took a towel and a basin of water and washed his disciples’ feet.

The lesson that Jesus was teaching was not that we need to go around looking for people with stinky feet that need washing. (Though there may in fact be a time and place for that.) But rather, in the abject humility that Jesus modeled, we should be willing to meet the needs of those around us.

We should be willing to take off our garments of pride and self-centeredness and do those tasks that others may find distasteful, tedious or even demeaning.

God’s Word reminds us in Colossians 3:12;

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

“Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience... all words that describe character traits of Jesus himself. All character traits that followers of Christ should seek to mirror in their own lives.

But developing such traits is never a quick do-it-yourself project. Removing our garments of pride and self-centeredness and instead clothing ourselves with Christ’s compassion, kindness and humility can only be done as we recognize and accept the saving work he did for us on the cross.

As he hung on that cross, stripped and beaten... and naked, he made a way for us to be;

“ clothed with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness”
Isaiah 61:10

The Apostle Paul shares this truth and promise in his letter to the Galatians;

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”
Galatians 3:26-27

For those who have placed their faith and trust in Christ, those who have; *“clothed”* themselves with Christ.

Then indeed; “Clothes make the man.”

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

You Are Of Great Value!

Q ... Do you want to hear some really Good News?

No matter what anyone may have said about you ... and no matter what anyone has done to you ... you are of **great value** to God!

Psalm 139:13-16 (NLT) ... “*You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. [14] Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—and how well I know it. [15] You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. [16] You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.*”

Do you understand what that means? It means that the **Person** who knows you best ... the **One** who knows your true significance ... your potential ... and your great worth ... is the same **One** who knit you together in your mother's womb.

... He knows what is in your heart ...
... He knows your great potential ...
... He even knows what is possible for you in the future!
... He already knows your life inside out ... and from A - Z!
... nobody can tell God anything about you that He doesn't already know!
... He knows every intimate detail of your life!
... don't forget ... God created you and He loves you unconditionally!

Because of all of this ... God is the only one who is qualified and worthy to judge your value or your worth!

Hebrews 4:12-13 (NLT) ... “*For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. **It exposes us for what we really are.***

[13] Nothing in all creation can hide from him. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes. This is the God to whom we must explain all that we have done.”

Charles Stanley ... *There is absolutely no need for you to go through life handicapped by your past experiences. The only accurate, eternal, unassailable gauge of your worth comes from Almighty God.*

... no one but God has a right to judge you!
... no one but God has a right to throw you away or reject you!
... you are of great worth to God!

1 Corinthians 7:23a (NCV) ... “*You all were bought at **a great price.***”

That clearly means that God and Jesus His Son believed that you were worth dying for. That means the cross was really about you!

Romans 5:7-8 (NLT) ... “*Now, no one is likely to die for a good person, though someone might be willing to die for a person who is especially good. [8] But God showed **his great love for us** by sending Christ to die for us while **we were still sinners.***”

Galatians 3:29 (NLT) ... “*And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are **his heirs**, and now **all the promises God gave to him belong to you.***”

Listen Christian ... you will always be a part of God's family!
... you are a very important representative of His presence in this world!
... God has chosen to live in you through the Holy Spirit.
... God doesn't make junk and He's not going to live in a dump!
You are special to God just the way you are! So as Charles Stanley has said ... ***don't despair or give in to negative thoughts about your significance. Be patient with yourself. Forgive your failures as He does. And continue embracing His unassailable truth that you are worthy and have great value in His sight.***

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*Lord, thank You that You made just the way that You wanted me to be.  
Your craftsmanship and design make me special. Help me to see me  
through Your eyes and not the worlds. Thank You for Your amazing love  
and grace and mercy. Thank You for giving me my eternal worth in Christ  
Jesus. Amen!*

*Pastor Randy Green*

# Who We Are In Christ!

1 Peter 2:10

One of the greatest challenges we will ever face in our lives is to understand, believe, and live out our true identities as followers of Jesus Christ. Just who are we as Christians and who is the Church?

**1 Peter 2:9-10 (NCV)** ... *“But you are a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession. You were chosen to tell about the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. [10] At one time you were not a people, but now you are God's people. In the past you had never received mercy, but now you have received God's mercy.”*

**Romans 10:11-13 (NLT)** ... *“As the Scriptures tell us, ‘Anyone who believes in him will not be disappointed.’ [12] Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They all have the same Lord, who generously gives his riches to all who ask for them. [13] For ‘Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”*

Initially, God chose the nation of Israel to be His people and He wanted them to help the world to come to know God. But they stumbled in that task. Even so, God still has plans for the Jewish nation. Scripture is clear about that truth. They are still His people.

God also had plans to include people into His kingdom that did not start out in His kingdom. Scripturally, people are defined either as Jews or Gentiles. People of God and those who were not people of God. Hebrews and then everyone else in the world. Jews and then those who are red, yellow, black and white or any combination there of. If you are not Jewish ... then you are a Gentile. The beautiful thing is that God loves us all. God loves all people and has a desire to save people from all the people groups of the world.

**John 3:16-18 (NLT)** ... *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. [17] God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. [18] There is no judgment awaiting those who trust him. But those who do not trust him have already*

*been judged for not believing in the only Son of God.”*

So whether you are Jew or Gentile, Paul said his message is the same for all people.

**Acts 20:21 (NLT)** ... *“I have had one message for Jews and Gentiles alike—the necessity of turning from sin and turning to God, and of faith in our Lord Jesus.”*

**1 Corinthians 1:23-25 (NLT)** ... *“So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. [24] But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. [25] This ‘foolish’ plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength.”*

**Galatians 3:28-29 (NLT)** *“There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians—you are one in Christ Jesus. [29] And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and now all the promises God gave to him belong to you.”*

**Ephesians 2:14-19 (NLT)** ... *“For Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us. [15] By his death he ended the whole system of Jewish law that excluded the Gentiles. His purpose was to make peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new person from the two groups. [16] Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. [17] He has brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and to us Jews who were near. [18] Now all of us, both Jews and Gentiles, may come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. [19] So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family.”*

**Ephesians 3:8-12 (NLT)** ... *“Just think! Though I did nothing to*

deserve it, and though I am the least deserving Christian there is, I was chosen for this special joy of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ. [9] I was chosen to explain to everyone this plan that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning.

[10] God's purpose was to show his wisdom in all its rich variety to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. They will see this when Jews and Gentiles are joined together in his church. [11] This was his plan from all eternity, and it has now been carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord.

[12] Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come fearlessly into God's presence, assured of his glad welcome."

**Q ... So who are we in Christ? ...**

... we are the redeemed ...

... we are forgiven and covered in the righteousness of Christ ...

... we are recipients of His grace and mercy ...

... we are brought together and united ...

... we are one new people ...

... we are God's holy people ...

... we are members of the family of God ...

... we are His church!

*Lord, teach us that our value and identity is in Jesus Christ  
Your Son and our Savior. You have no favorites. You love all people.*

*You don't see color, or language, or status, or what we have or don't have. You see only souls who have trusted Your Son Jesus and been saved or souls who have not trusted Jesus for salvation.*

**1 Peter 1:17 (NLT)**

*And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites when he judges. He will judge or reward you according to what you do. So you must live in reverent fear of him during your time as foreigners here on earth.*

*Pastor Randy Green*

# Stay At It!

2 Timothy 2:15

**Luke 9:62 (NLT)** ... “*But Jesus told him, ‘Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.’*”

Kingdom work is more like a marathon than a sprint. It’s not over in a day or even a week. It is a life long calling! It requires diligent effort on our part. So have you ever considered **diligence** to be a crucial character trait that is absolutely necessary to the successful Christian life?

**Proverbs 21:5 (NASB)** ... “*The plans of the **diligent** lead surely to advantage ...*”

**2 Timothy 2:15 (NASB)** ... “***Be diligent** to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.*”

**2 Peter 1:5-8 (NLT)** ... “***So make every effort ( be diligent )** to apply the benefits of these promises to your life. Then your faith will produce a life of moral excellence. A life of moral excellence leads to knowing God better. [6] Knowing God leads to self-control. Self-control leads to patient endurance, and patient endurance leads to godliness. [7] Godliness leads to love for other Christians, and finally you will grow to have genuine love for everyone. [8] The more you grow like this, the more you will become productive and useful in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

What Peter is saying to us ... is that we have to stay at it if we are going to acquire the Christ-like character that we need to be fruitful in the Kingdom of God. We have to work at it daily. Charles Stanley says that is because ... *such qualities are not found in superficial Christians. They*

*take root in one’s character only through steadfast application and pursuit.*

The greatest area for our diligence must always be in seeking to know and please God better and proclaiming the Good News of salvation through our Savior, Jesus Christ.

**John 9:4 (NLT)** ... Jesus said quite clearly ... “***All of us must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent me, because there is little time left before the night falls and all work comes to an end.***”

It is so important for us to walk in the ways and the wisdom of God. It is not popular nor is it politically correct, but as Christians we must actively and conscientiously obey and apply God’s Word to our lives and proclaim it to others without growing weary or quitting! Where would we be today if believers like Paul had thrown in the towel.

**2 Timothy 4:5-8 (NLT)** ... “*But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don’t be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at bringing others to Christ. Complete the ministry God has given you. [6] As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. [7] I have fought a good fight, I have **finished the race**, and I have **remained faithful**. [8] And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness that the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that great day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his glorious return.*”

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Lord, thank you for Your example of diligence. Forgive us for the times we just want to quit! Inspire us to be faithful! Amen

Pastor Randy Green

Candlepower

Psalm 119:105

*“Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.”*

I received a really cool gift this past year for Christmas.

It is a flashlight. But this is not just any flashlight. This flashlight is brighter than any flashlight I have every owned.

You’ve probably seen the type I’m talking about. Sleek little aluminum case, not much bigger than a good sized magic marker. Rechargeable battery and...

24,000 Candela. Or, as we used to call it; Candlepower

Just what the heck is a “candlepower” anyway?

“The term candlepower was originally defined in the United Kingdom, by the Metropolitan Gas Act 1860, as the light produced by a pure spermaceti candle that weighs 1/6 pound (76 grams) and burns at a rate of 120 grains per hour (7.8 grams per hour). Spermaceti is a material from the heads of sperm whales, and was once used to make high-quality candles.”

(Those Brits... they still call a flashlight a “torch.”)

So I am trying to imagine 24,000 candles, each weighing 1/6 of a pound (4000 pounds... 2 tons) crammed into this little flashlight.

And then I see the ads for 6 MILLION candlepower spotlights! Bam... head blown!

But some flashlights or spotlights, or even light bulbs nowadays use “lumens” as the measure of brightness.

The difference is described this way:

“Candlepower is a measure of the brightest part of the beam of a flashlight whereas lumens is a measure of the total amount of light put out by a flashlight.”

(I know all of you parents that were having to homeschool your kids the past 3 months wished I had done this devotional earlier... you could have checked off the science class box for that day)

When measuring lumens, you can also think of it as; “the light illuminated in a 1-square-foot area one foot away from a single candle.” Which brings me back to Psalm 119:105

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Most of us are familiar with this verse and have probably heard sermons or devotionals that used this text.

The lamp that the Psalmist refers to would have probably been a small clay pot with olive oil and a wick. About 1 candlepower, or just a few lumens, lighting up the pathway for just a couple of steps. Like me, you may have heard how this verse is an encouragement to trust God and His Word for each step of the way, not knowing what may lie three or four steps ahead, just out of the range of that one candlepower.

But the verse also states that God’s Word is a *“light to my path.”*

The Gospel of John tells us that;

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."
(John 1:1-2)

The eternal Word of God was, and is, from *"the beginning,"* and Peter reminds us that: *"...the word of the Lord endures forever."*
(1 Peter 1:25)

Trusting God's Word not only provides us with the light we need to take each step of each day, even when we can't see what lies just outside of our perceived circle of illumination, but also with the assurance that the eternal Word has gone both behind and before us lighting the way.

John goes on to say: *"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*
(John 1:4-5)

In these days of darkness and uncertainty we do not know what tomorrow may hold. Our little one lumen, or one candlepower oil lamp may only light up the next step. But we can be confident that the Word which was *"in the beginning,"* the Word which was and is the *"life and light of all mankind;"*

"shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Christ Our Hope

Hebrews 6:19

Hope is a funny thing. Funny as in strange, not funny as in humorus.

What makes hope hope is that it hasn't happened yet. Hope is based on a promise yet to be fulfilled, a package that has not been delivered. We all know what this is like. With online shopping we have a lot of hope.

We hope the item measures up to what we need.
We hope it is worth what we paid.
We hope it is actually shipped after we paid.
We hope it is packed carefully and handled well.
We hope it arrives to our home.
We hope it is not stolen from our porch.

So hope is not new to us. And hope in Christ is in some ways the same, in some different. Hope has a few definitions in the Bible, but in the context of a believer's hope, it has three:

1. an expectation of something good,

2. joyful and confident expectation of eternal salvation,
3. He who is the foundation of our hope

Hebrews 6:19-- *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*

To get a better sense of what the writer of Hebrews is talking about, go and read Hebrews 6, but in short he is talking about the reliability of God's promises. He can't make a promise he won't keep, or make a vow he won't fulfill. It's not in his nature to do that; it's impossible for God to break a promise.

That's the security we have, right there.

When we make promises, sometimes we break them. Something comes up, circumstances change, maybe we just said "I promise" to shut someone up. You get the picture.

The thing is, nothing sneaks up on God; nothing is hidden. He lives in eternity so He sees everything at once (that sounds weird, but that's how eternity works). He is not surprised when we get sick or lose our jobs or experience trauma or lose our home in a storm or whatever else.

And he doesn't get surprised by our sin. God has never said, "Wow! I never saw that coming!" Now I've seen a lot of movies and I don't get surprised very often by plot twists, but every once in a while I get surprised. Not God. Not once.

That's where our hope lay, in God's guarantee to fulfill his promises because his character keeps him from breaking them and nothing catches him off guard that makes him change his plans. How cool is that?!

If you're in need right now, and you are, take refuge in Christ, unchanging and unsurprisable, keeper of promises and fulfiller of hope.

I was reading David Guzik's study on Heb. 6 and he points back to the cities of refuge that Israel was commanded to have in Numbers 35. These were places of safe keeping for someone who accidentally killed someone, to stay until their trial so no one pursued vengeance. Guzik lists the similarity between Jesus and the refuge cities:

1. Both are within easy reach of the person in need.
2. Both are open to all, not just Israelites.

3. Both were places to LIVE, not visit.
4. Both were the only true alternative; otherwise destruction is guaranteed.
5. Both provide protection only within their boundaries.
6. Full freedom is granted only at the death of the High Priest
7. The difference, however, is that only the innocent find refuge in the city; in Jesus, the guilty can come and find refuge!

No matter who you are, what you've done or what you are going through, Jesus wants to be your refuge, your hope, your expected good thing. Come to Jesus.

Father, thank you that we can have hope in Christ and that indeed Christ IS that hope. Thank you for your faithfulness to fulfill your promises and that we can rest in you and take refuge. You know where I am and what I need and you're not surprised by it. Please take care of it for me so that my faith is increased and your Name is lifted up. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Finding Peace God's Way!

Colossians 3:12-15

What was that phrase we've all heard ... **Boys will be boys!** Well ... **people will be people** as well! We live in a fallen world. We are all sinful people. God is real and sovereign. He is our only hope for peace and order. Jesus is the answer to our conflicts.

It is inevitable, people of all ages will have conflicts and disputes. That even happens between people who love each other and very much want to get along.

Mark Hoover has written ... "Conflicts and disputes are more likely when we have to deal with someone who seems to be trying to make our lives difficult. When that happens, we may wonder, **How am I going to approach this? Do I stand my ground and demand my rights? Do I try to compromise? Do I give in and then let go?** Something inside of us, some internal referee, will make the call."

Listen carefully to what the apostle Paul has to say about dealing with conflict:

Colossians 3:12-15 (NLT) ... "Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. [13] You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. [14] And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony. [15] And **let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts.** For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful."

Romans 12:18 (NLT) ... "**Do your part** to live in peace with everyone, **as much as possible.**"

The key is found in verse 15 ... **let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts.** That my friends is our big challenge. It is also a choice we make. That choice is the foundation of relationships.

Our big challenge is to let the peace of Christ **rule** in our hearts. This word in the Greek means ... **to act as an umpire ... to arbitrate or to decide.** Instead of wanting what we want or what others want, we need to let what God wants that can bring us true peace shape our actions and attitudes. Look at what James has written ...

James 4:1-3 (NLT) ... "What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Isn't it the whole army of evil desires at war within you? [2] You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous for what others have, and you can't possess it, so you fight and quarrel to take it away from them. And yet the reason you don't have what you want is that you don't ask God for it. [3] And even when you do ask, you don't get it because your whole motive is wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure."

I hope you will honestly ponder these words. God has promised to meet all of our needs. Not our wants. For those who trust and know God, the peace comes from understanding that He is always with us, guiding our steps, and supplying all of our needs. That truth shapes attitudes and actions. It also builds and maintains healthy relationships.

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***Father, help me to chose to live in Your peace with a Christ-like heart.  
Help me to love others like You love me!***

***Pastor Randy Green***

## Comfort Food

Psalm 119:76

*"May your unfailing love be my comfort..."*

What is your favorite "comfort food?"

I heard a news report on the radio the other day that talked about how there has been a significant increase in sales of what might be called "comfort food" during these past months of the coronavirus pandemic.

You know; Double Stuf Oreo cookies, Butter Pecan ice cream, (or any other flavor of ice cream for that matter) Little Debbie Cakes (my obvious favorite) or any one of the myriad of "go to" snacks or desserts one may choose.

But the one "snack" or "comfort" food that is leading the pack is Pepperidge Farms "Goldfish." Those delicious cheesy crackers that seem to be a staple of every church nursery or preschool. Those magical little morsels of goodness that can quiet even the fussiest toddler, never mind that half of them (the crackers - not the toddler) end up smashed into the carpet or somewhere in the deep recesses of the back seat of the mini-van.

It is a well known fact that when some people get anxious, or perhaps even "fussy" in a toddler-like way they will reach for that favorite "comfort food."

MEDA - the Multi-Service Eating Disorders Association makes this statement about comfort foods, or "Emotional Eating:"

"In times when we need to comfort ourselves, relax, take it all away, sometimes reaching for that special something to eat just does the trick.

That's right, it's normal and ok. And when our clients understand this truth, the 'shame-monster' shrinks a little. Why do we say it's ok to eat emotionally? Well, for one reason...it works.

When we start eating, we go into a relaxation response (aka parasympathetic response, or "rest and digest" response). As humans, we digest really well when we're calm, so we shift into this relaxed state as soon as we start eating."

So there you have it. Slay that "shame-monster!" it's OK to have an Oreo cookie or two! (Just not a whole sleeve of Oreos or pint of Butter Pecan though!)

As good (and we might even say "tempting") as our favorite comfort foods are, God's Word offers us a far more satisfying source of comfort. A comfort food we can feast on with no fear of having to confront the "shame-monster."

You can do a search of the word "comfort" in the Bible and find all sorts of "comforting" promises.

Here are just a few:

*"Your righteousness, God, reaches to the heavens,  
you who have done great things. Who is like you, God?  
Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter,  
you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth  
you will again bring me up.  
You will increase my honor and comfort me once more."*

Psalm 71:19-21

*“Remember your word to your servant,  
for you have given me hope.  
My comfort in my suffering is this:  
Your promise preserves my life.”* Psalm 119:49-50

*“Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth;  
burst into song, you mountains!  
For the Lord comforts his people  
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones”* Isaiah 49:13

And over in the New Testament:

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the  
Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts  
us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any  
trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For  
just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also  
our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is  
for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for  
your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the  
same sufferings we suffer.”* 2 Corinthians 1:3-6

It is interesting that the word translated “comfort” in the passage is from the Greek word “parakaleo.” this is the same word used in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of John as Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, spoke these words of comfort to his disciples:

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me”* John 14:1

And then down in verse 16-17:

*“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another  
advocate (parakletos -comforter) to help you and be with you  
forever— the Spirit of truth.”* John 14:16-17a

*“But the Advocate, (parakletos - comforter) 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. 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.”* John 14:26-27

With all that is going on in our world today it might be easy for our hearts to be troubled. As we look around our own country we might well be afraid and anxious.

But rather than just reach for that favorite comfort food, we can turn to the source of comfort within us - God’s Holy Spirit. Promised to us by God the Son and provided to us by the love of God the Father.

We can say with Psalmist:

*“May your unfailing love be my comfort...”*

*-Pastor Ronnie Bunch*

# God Is My Courage!

Deuteronomy 31:1-8

I stressed in my message this past Sunday that God is in control! A lot of the world doesn't know or understand that. Many try to ignore this reality or wish they could change this fact. There are even some who fight against God to see who is going to be in control.

**Proverbs 16:33 (NLT)** ... *"We may throw the dice, but **the Lord** determines how they fall."*

Just because your life and the world seems to be spinning aimlessly out of control doesn't mean that there is no God; or that God is powerless to bring order out of complete chaos; or even that God doesn't care about your situation of the world. God cares! God is in control! And God has a plan for where you and our world are going!

Like many, you may be wanting to know how I know that to be true!

I know it because of what I have seen God do in my life. I know God. I have seen Him at work! I have never seen God visibly or heard God audibly, but I have experienced His presence and heard Him speak through His written Word and in many other ways. He is alive and well! He is more real than anything you can see or hear or touch! God has spoken more clearly to me in these recent days than ever in my life. God is on the move executing every detail of His plan. I see God at work doing all that He has promised!

I know that God is working His plans for me, you, and the world because that is what His Word promises and proves. The Bible is full of examples where God stated His plans, made promises, and then made them happen! God never changes! He is the same God that He has always been. He is faithful to His ways and promises!

**Deuteronomy 31:1-8 (NLT)** ... *"When Moses had finished saying these things to all the people of Israel, [2] he said, 'I am now 120 years old and am no longer able to lead you. The Lord has told me that I will not cross the Jordan River. [3] But the Lord your God himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy the nations*

*living there, and you will take possession of their land. Joshua is your new leader, and he will go with you, just as the Lord promised. [4] The Lord will destroy the nations living in the land, just as he destroyed Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites. [5] The Lord will hand over to you the people who live there, and you will deal with them as I have commanded you. [6] Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid of them! The Lord your God will go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor forsake you.'*

Look again with me at what God told Moses:

... you will not cross over the Jordan river ...

... I will cross over ahead of My people ...

... I will conquer your enemies and take the land for you ...

... Joshua will be your new leader who will take you across the river into the promise land.

Now all of that God did and was prepared to do even more until you get to **Joshua 7:1** where it says ... ***But Israel violated God's instructions*** ... in other words, they failed to do exactly what God told them to do! Blessings come from trusting and obeying God.

God did His part! And was ready to do more! And God gave Joshua courage to lead His people. Listen again to what God said through Moses to Joshua.

*[7] Then Moses called for Joshua, and as all Israel watched he said to him, 'Be strong and courageous! For you will lead these people into the land that the Lord swore to give their ancestors. You are the one who will deliver it to them as their inheritance. [8] Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord is the one who goes before you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor forsake you.'"*

The key here is found in verse 8: ... ***the Lord your God will personally go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor abandon you.***

God said that twice to and through Moses to His people and specifically to Joshua! And Joshua would have heard this promise both times. It made a difference knowing His God was real and in control! It inspired Him to lead. These words gave him courage to lead in a very difficult



time! He believed in God and He believed God. Joshua trusted His God and led with godly courage! No where is that courage seen more profoundly than when Joshua spoke to the people he was called to lead:

**Joshua 24:14-15 (NLT)** ... *"So honor the Lord and serve him wholeheartedly. Put away forever the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord alone. [15] But if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? **But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.**"*

Pardon the southern jargon ... but that took guts! He said ... ***you do what you are going to do, but me and my family ... we are going to serve the Lord!***

That kind of gutsy courage is desperately needed in our day! Joshua is in a long line of people in the Bible that lived in the courage that God provided them.

The apostle Paul was also courageous!

**Charles Stanley** ... *Considering the persecution and trials he endured to proclaim the gospel, we can probably agree that the apostle Paul was brave. He was oppressed by religious leaders, beaten by magistrates, and repeatedly driven out of towns by large, riotous crowds. Yet through it all, he stood firm in his allegiance to Christ.*

## Q ... Where did Paul's courage come from?

1. It certainly didn't originate with Paul.
2. His courage came to him because He knew God the Father was present with him.

**2 Timothy 4:14-18 (NLT)** ... *"Alexander the coppersmith has done me much harm, but the Lord will judge him for what he has done. [15] Be careful of him, for he fought against everything we said. [16] The first time I was brought before the judge, no one was with me. Everyone had abandoned me. I hope it will not be counted against them. [17] **But the Lord stood with me and gave me strength,** that I might preach the Good News in all its fullness for all the Gentiles to hear. And he saved me from certain death. [18] Yes, and the Lord will deliver me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly Kingdom. To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen."*

It has been said that courage ***is not the absence of fear ... but instead it is the determination that there is One who is greater than anything that could come against you.***

~~~~~  
Lord, be our courage and help us to trust You and to live to please You. Thank You Lord for walking through life with us who trust Your Son!
Pastor Randy Green

Don't Waste Your Life

1 Timothy 6:20-21

Muhammad Ali once said, "If you think the same way at 55 as you did at 25 you've wasted 30 years of your life."

This is why teenagers roll their eyes at their parents and why they buck authority: Adults don't get it. They don't know what they're talking about.

I was listening to someone today joking about the music of the 90s. I was in college and a young adult and even played in a band in the 90s, so I knew what he said was right. He said everyone was gravelly and angsty and bitter. I thought of Alanis Morissette and Avril Lavigne, who sang angry songs and wore dark clothes and never smiled because the world is garbage!

Then they grew up. They smile now, write songs about love and even dye their hair in lighter colors on occasion. Did they "sell out"? No. They learned more. And they put the concept of pain and suffering into the bigger picture of how life can be. They grew and learned and developed, which is what happens as we progress through life. They thought differently at 35 than at 20. That's growth.

Dr. James Merritt said in a recent sermon that he used to be much more legalistic and think that what is sin for him is sin for everyone. He admits that he didn't have as much grace or compassion as he should have and he has had to learn to cultivate that. Make no mistake, he is

still a solid biblical scholar and evangelist. The truth of God is the truth and that truth does not change. But Dr. Merritt's understanding of that truth in a real world context has been refined over time and through his life experience.

I can say the same for myself. I know many believers who can say the same. As we get to know God and His Word better, as we go through life, as we encounter people we are forced to examine our faith in practical ways, working through how truth plays out in life.

1 Timothy 6:20-21-- *Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you.*

This is how Paul finished his letter to Timothy. It was so important that he made sure to squeeze it in as the last words Timothy may hear from him. It wouldn't be of course, but neither of them may have known that at the time.

This is the flip side of truth. Even as our thinking changes, truth does not. We need to cling to that truth, "guarding what has been entrusted" to us.

Ravi Zacharias said, "Truth by its very nature, excludes." If two truths are competing, then at least one of them isn't truth. What's true is true, whether you believe it or not. That's how truth works.

I can deny the truth of gravity at my own peril. There's a story of an optimist who jumped from the roof of a ten-story building. At an open window on the fifth floor he was heard saying, "So far, so good!"

In a time when everyone is questioning truth or is saying they can develop their own truth, we need to cling to what is actually true.

Paul tells Timothy to turn away from what is "falsely called knowledge" as he guards the truth that has been entrusted to him. He knew that in a culture where new ideas were constantly being introduced, it may be a challenge for Timothy to filter through it, and he may begin to disbelieve the full gospel.

We are seeing this today and it is becoming much more blatant. Not just in matters of faith, but in matters of science, politics, culture, relationships, sexuality, and so many other areas. I see Christians investing in things that are obviously unsound, in an effort to express a modern understanding of compassion.

We are wandering from the truth.

Be on guard, brothers and sisters, and turn away from opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge. Read and watch critically and skeptically. Prayerfully consider what is new to you. Come to know the Word and filter what you see through the Scripture.

Father God, thank you for the truth of your Word. Thank you that we can know you and can know how we should respond to the world around us. Even when we do it imperfectly, you give us grace as we grow. Help me to come to understand how to respond to what I see and hear. Most importantly, help me to cling to the truth I have known and to more fully understand You and your Truth. In Jesus' Name, amen.f

Pastor Art Stafford

The Real Enemy!

Ephesians 6:12-13

Ephesians 6:12-13 (NLT) ... “For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against **the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world**, against **those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world**, and against **wicked spirits in the heavenly realms**. [13] Use every piece of God's armor to resist the enemy in the time of evil, so that after the battle you will still be standing firm.”

Please hear me and hear God ... as followers of Jesus Christ ... we are in a war! But that war is **not** with people ... it is with the Satan. He knows he is running out of time and so he is busier than ever! He is doing anything and everything he can with in his limited power to disrupt the kingdom of God and the redemption of lost humanity. He is on the prowl! He is on the attack! I have never seen the church being hit so hard in America! We have a great work to do ... but our enemy is in full battle mode to distract us and discourage us.

Dr. Ted Traylor ... *The persistent, insidious, and evil schemes of the devil must be combated. We are called to be strong and to stand firm against the devil. Yet our fight is not physical; it will not and cannot be fought or won in the flesh. That's why Paul called us to be strong ... in the Lord and in the power of His might (Vs.11).*

We must turn to the Lord and trust Him to heal our spiritual issues before we can ever address any or all of our relational problems. I said Sunday that our world is in a mess! Well, the world doesn't know how to fix the problems we face because they are spiritual! The world doesn't but God does. And the beautiful thing is that He is ready to help us. But it has to be done His way. We have to love and trust Him and then our neighbor

as well.

Matthew 22:37-40 (NLT) ... “Jesus replied, ‘**You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.**’ [38] **This is the first and greatest commandment.** [39] **A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’** [40] **All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.**”

Of the 613 laws in the Jewish law ... all can be summed up with just theses two. ... We are called to love God and love people.

Dr. William Rice ... *If you truly love God, you will also love people who bear the image of God. People who brag about their spiritual devotion but then mistreat others or use them for selfish gain deceive themselves. If you don't love people, you don't love God.*

1 John 4:16-20 (NLT) ... “We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in him. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. [17] And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world. [18] Such love has no fear because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of judgment, and this shows that his love has not been perfected in us. [19] We love each other as a result of his loving us first. [20] If someone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen?”

~~~~~  
***Lord, teach us to love unconditionally like you love us. Help us to fight our real enemy with the spiritual weapons you give us, but help us to love people like you love us.***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# Foot on the Gas

*1 John 2:2*

The high school I attended in Florida (Go, Scorpions!) only offered driver's ed in the summer. If you wanted to take the class you had to give up half a day, every Monday through Friday for a month. The first half of the class was classroom and the second half was driving.

One of the things our teacher reiterated all the time was that we did not need to use the gas pedal because the car would move fast enough on its own when it was idling in gear. He only told us this as we first started because we actually had a driver's ed parking lot, which was lined for driving and various kinds of parking.

At one end of the parking lot was a huge tree and on the other side of that tree was a loop. Naturally, when someone drove around that loop they floored it for just a few seconds before quickly slowing down as they made it back to the main parking lot, where Coach Crosky would be waiting with his arched eyebrow, shaking his head. He never said anything, though. He knew

telling fifteen-year-olds not to hit the gas was a losing proposition.

Taking the gospel to the world, however, requires effort.

**1 John 2:2--** *He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

Unlike a car with an automatic transmission, the gospel doesn't move forward on its own.

John began by telling the believers of who Christ was, but he said in 2:1 that the purpose of the letter was to remind them not to sin, but if they DID sin, we had an "advocate with the Father."

I get the sense that John was dropping a hint that other people needed to know the same thing the church already knew, even though the purpose of the letter was to speak to the attitudes of the believers.

We like to think that our actions will speak to our faith so we don't need to boldly proclaim the gospel, but that's not usually how it works. There are some who will say that the Christians they know are wonderful, kind, caring people. But

they still may not have ever heard a clear presentation of the gospel.

Sharing the gospel is not hard from the standpoint of knowing what to say, but the fact that we are speaking light into darkness means we will face opposition and we know it. That, a lot of times, is the scarier part.

As Jerry Vines says, when we share the gospel we are attacking the very foundations of hell itself! And Satan will fight viciously to protect them.

Let us not think that because we have a Jesus fish on our cars and wear Christian t-shirts and have a Bible verse on our coffee mugs, that people will place their faith in Christ.

Let us also not be foolish enough to think that Christ died for the godly. It is in Christ alone that we can become godly, and it is through his sacrifice that our sins are removed and we are set free. That freedom is offered to all.

When I was in high school and I floored the pedal to that 1985 Buick Century, I got my fair share of arched eyebrows and head shakes from

Coach Crosky. But from Christ I really prefer a "Well-done, good and faithful servant!"

I have worries, too, sometimes, about sharing the gospel. I get stumped by questions and I get tongue-tied. I have Scripture references slip out of my head right when I need them, so I get it. I know how tough it is, but as John reminds us, Jesus didn't just die for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world.

They may just not know it yet.

*Father, I know there are those around me that need to know of your love and forgiveness. Help me to see and know those around me the way you do. Give me the courage and insight to share the gospel to those around me. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Garland and Gold

*Proverbs 1:8-9*

Shows like *Leave It To Beaver*, *My Three Sons* and *The Andy Griffith Show* aren't made anymore. And you can't watch these shows unless you have a channel specifically showing classic shows or have a subscription where you can binge the classics.

Shows about parenting are so much different now as they have tried to be more inclusive, reflecting the current culture of single parents, blended families, or strong female figures. The topics they cover are a lot different, too. What happens is that instead of just reflecting culture, it also influences it.

One of the things that was great about the classic family shows was that they had fathers and mothers who gave sage advice to try to direct their children to do the right thing. When Opie would break a window, for instance, his father made him go to the store owner, confess and apologize, then pay or work to have it repaired. This was part of the learning process

and taught things that Opie would need to know and practice for the rest of his life.

**Pro 1:8-9--** *Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. 9 They are a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.*

There's a saying that's been around for a while: "The older I get, the smarter my parents get." I don't have to tell you that it means we begin to understand what our parents tried to teach us when we were younger; now it makes sense.

The word for "listen" here is *shama*, which means to hear and obey or to listen with discernment. In other words, it is not just hearing your father's instruction, but is taking it in and applying it.

To put it another way, the proverb is saying not to ignore what your father teaches you, but to apply it, and not to wander from your mother's instructions. David Guzik says, "The idea is that the **instruction** and **law** given from parent to child will adorn the life of their children, if they will only receive it. Like a crown **on your head** or **chains about the neck**, such wisdom will be a reward to a younger generation."

As we approach Father's Day, I encourage you to look back on your father's instruction. If you never had a father who was active in your life, who would you consider a father figure, a man who invested in you? A teacher, coach, grandfather, uncle, pastor, friend's father? What did they teach you about personal responsibility, morality, love, forgiveness, discipline, work ethic?

My father was around and active in my life and he taught me so much, but I was stubborn and foolish, hard-headed and tough to teach. As a result we butted heads a lot. As an adult my father never held it against me or embarrassed me in front of my kids by bringing up the dumb stuff I did growing up. He knew that part of learning was learning the hard way.

But he never gave up. All the way to the day he died he passed on his knowledge to me and my siblings.

One thing that's important to note is that this verse immediately follows another popular verse, Prov 1:7: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Here's what this flow indicates: fear the Lord and don't despise his instruction. Your parents are your primary teachers of the Lord's instruction. Listen to them, absorb and apply that instruction and that is a reward in itself.

What if your parents were/are not believers? Do you still need to listen? Yes! While their values may not be based in personal faith, they still have values to pass on. Listen and filter them through the truth of God's Word.

What if they are not involved in your life? Find someone who invests in you and listen to their insight and wisdom; ask them for advice when you need it and take it to heart.

If your parents are still alive, thank them for passing on their insight to you and recognize what they have done for you. They would love to hear it!

Father, we know that you give us parents and adults to guide us. Thank you for those who speak your truth to us. In Jesus' Name, amen.

**Pastor Art Stafford**



## Hello... Is Anybody Listening...?

Luke 1:13

*"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard."*

Hello... Is anybody listening...?

Perhaps you know of someone who felt like asking this question of God. Or if you really want to be honest... perhaps at some point that person was yourself.

As we look around at our world, and especially our nation today, we know and trust that believers are praying for all of the current events that are plaguing our society.

We see and hear of reports (if you look in the right places) of Christian brothers and sisters of all backgrounds, ethnicities and races coming together to ask for God's divine intervention.

And yet... the virus is still "out there," the civil and social unrest continues, and moral decay continues its downward spiral.

Hello... Is anybody listening...?

The 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke records how;

*"In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old."*

Luke 1:5-7

*"In the time of Herod king of Judea..."*

These were troubling times for those who were trying to live; *"righteous in the sight of God."*

There was civil and racial tension between the Hebrew people and the occupying Roman forces and authorities. Even the Jewish "king," Herod, was thought by many to be illegitimate and was in fact hated by a large percentage of the population.

But there were still those who sought the Lord. There were still those who were faithfully serving God and looking to Him for deliverance. Looking to Him for an answer to their prayers.

Verse 11 of this chapter states that;

*"...the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.""*

What prayer?

No doubt Zechariah, like most all God-fearing Jews would have been praying for the coming of the long awaited Messiah. The One who would deliver the people from all the civil and even religious oppression and unrest.

But Zechariah and Elizabeth also had a personal, specific prayer request of God. Luke points out that;

*"...they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old."*

Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for a child. For how long? Well, we can imagine this was not something that they just recently thought about doing because the passage tells us;

*"...they were both very old."*

So most likely they had been praying for this one thing for a very long time.

Hello... Is anybody listening...?

But the angel responds; *"your prayer has been heard."*

Some translations have; *"your prayer is heard;"* (KJV/NKJV)

Now this can lead us to a couple of different conclusions:

1. Zechariah and Elizabeth had been, and were continuing to make this request for a child to God, even though *"they were both very old."*
2. This specific prayer, perhaps made recently, but no doubt made in the distant past, *"is heard"* by the God who inhabits eternity.

We can take comfort in the fact that we have a God who hears our prayers. Our general prayers, but also our specific prayer *"is heard"* by a loving God. With the Psalmist we can say:

*"I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer. Show me the wonders of your great love,"*  
Psalm 17:6-7

*"I call on the Lord in my distress, and he answers me."*  
Psalm 120:1

In these days of distress and confusion, as we continue to wait for an answer from God may we be faithful to continue to pray, trusting that our prayer both *"has been heard,"* and *"is heard."*

Hello... Yep, somebody *is* listening...

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

# The Most Important Trait of Being Family!

1 Peter 3:8-9

The absolute most important thing is how we treat each other!

**1 Peter 3:8-12 (NLT)** ... *“Finally, all of you should be of one mind, full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts and humble minds. [9] Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate when people say unkind things about you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God wants you to do, and he will bless you for it. [10] For the Scriptures say, ‘If you want a happy life and good days, keep your tongue from speaking evil, and keep your lips from telling lies. [11] Turn away from evil and do good. Work hard at living in peace with others. [12] The eyes of the Lord watch over those who do right, and his ears are open to their prayers. But the Lord turns his face against those who do evil.’”*

Peter is very clear in his letter about how we are to treat each other in the family of God. It is important that we have the mind of Christ. We are called to live in peace and harmony with each other. We are to be unified understanding that unity doesn't mean uniformity. But it does mean working and worshipping together in the midst of our diversity. We are told by Peter to have compassion for each other. It is also important that we learn to have sympathy for the struggle and pain of others. We are suppose to love each other as a family because we are in Christ part of a much larger family. To function as family, we must be humble and kind.

Peter also focuses on the most important trait of being family ... that of forgiving each other. To forgive others is to release the hurt that we have experienced. It is to refuse to grow bitter and to let God handle the matter. Yes it can be hard to forgive, but a forgiving spirit is the real key to freedom.

Peter is very clear that we are not to return evil for evil. It is so important to live on a different level and to take the high road. We are called to act like Christ and not those who choose to hurt us. The worst thing is to live with bitterness in your hearts toward others.

Remember what **Jesus** said ...

***Father, forgiven them for they don't know what they are doing.***

~~~~~

Father, forgiveness is certainly in short supply in our world today. We desperately need Your help. You perfectly demonstrated love and forgiveness with the Cross Your Son died on. There has never been a greater injustice than that of the crucifixion of Christ.

Help us come together in Christ to be family.

Please teach us to forgive and move forward together in the love of Christ Jesus.

In Jesus name, Amen.

Pastor Randy Green

Love Cares Enough To Give

John 3:16

Have you ever stopped to wonder just how much God loves you?

Romans 5:6-8 (NLT) ... “When we were *utterly helpless*, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. [7] Now, no one is likely to die for a good person, though someone might be willing to die for a person who is especially good. [8] But *God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*”

God demonstrated the depth of His love for you and me by giving us His love gift of Jesus. He gave us His very best! He gave us His one and only Son and Jesus gave His life!

John 3:16-17 (NLT) ... “For God so loved the world that he gave *his only Son*, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. [17] God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, *but to save it.*”

Even before He created the human race, God knew that we would be incapable of living a pure and sinless life, so He made plans to send Jesus to show us the way and to be the way. And praise God, Jesus His Son did not hesitate or say no to the Father, and He willingly gave His life on a cross so that we could be forgiven for the sins we have committed. He also gave to us who trust Him everlasting life with Him, the Holy Spirit, and the Father.

Every day is a gift to us from a loving God. God loved you enough to save your lost soul. He also loves others enough to use you to reach out to them. We all have friends and we know others that need to trust Jesus. Especially now!

Think for a minute about the people that God used to bring you to faith in Christ. You can name several I am sure. Take a moment and thank God for their love for God and love for you. Thank Him that they cared enough to give of their time and effort to reach out to You.

Now, take a moment and think about people you know who don't have a relationship with God. I am sure you can name several as well. Why not write their names down and then give them some of your time and began praying for them. While you are at it ... think of some different things you can do for them to show them the love of Christ.

And while you are praying, please pray for our nations, as different as we all are, to learn how to come together as one people and one nation under God. Pray that God would continue to use our church and other churches to bring about the relational healing our nation desperately needs.

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*Father, thank you for letting me see just how much you love me and all people! I confess that I am still learning to love the way you love. Please forgive me and help me to care about others the way you do! Teach me to have a giving heart that cares about the lost souls of people.*

*Thank you Lord, in the name of Jesus, Amen!*

*Pastor Randy Green*

# Loving Service

*Galatians 5:13*

Surely by now you have heard of CHAZ (now renamed CHOP) in Seattle. CHAZ stands for Capital Hill Autonomous Zone. It was renamed to Capital Hill Organized Protest when the protesters realized that by calling themselves an autonomous zone they were declaring themselves a different territory than the US and the US could use military force to overrun and conquer them.

The other part of that, however, is that they have not really wanted to be autonomous. They have been asking people to send in food and supplies. They are trying to keep out law enforcement and first responders. Until there was a dumpster fire and they called the fire department. Someone was shot and they called the police.

They want freedom when they want it, but outside help when they want that as well.

Let's be honest, we want the same thing with God. We want God's goodness and grace and protection, but we also want him to leave us alone when we're living our own lives outside of his commands.

In Galatians 5, Paul tells the church in Galatia that he knew someone was coming in and telling them they had their freedom in Christ, but that they also had to begin obeying Jewish laws and/or other moral codes to be at peace with God. Paul corrected that by speaking of their freedom in Christ, saying Christ has set us free, but not to use that freedom for sinful reasons.

**Galatians 5:13--** *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.*

Jesus gave a good example of what this looked like, and of course he's going to do it right. For example, no one is supposed to work on the sabbath, but Jesus healed on the sabbath more than once (Luke 13:10-17 and Mark 3:1-6 for example).

Maybe healing isn't work for Jesus. It's serving. It's basic care for his flock. In Luke 13 after

healing a woman on the sabbath he was called out for it and he said, "You feed and care for your animals on the sabbath! Shouldn't this woman be set free on the sabbath?"

Crickets.

Paul directs the church in Galatia not to try to live by the law because if they do they will have to be perfect in its observance. Instead, to live freely since Christ has set them free, and to use that freedom to serve others in humility.

What does it look like to be free to serve? That is different for each of us, but that's the beauty of the Holy Spirit. When we stay close to Christ, following him as he leads, we can more clearly hear the Spirit and when he prompts us to move or to act or to speak, it will be for a reason.

In our freedom the bonds are released so we can serve each other more freely. We are free to love, free to serve, free to move, free to encourage, free to bear each other's burdens, free to meet their needs, free to be a friend.

What binds you to the point that you do not feel you can serve others the way you would like?

What keeps you from using your gifts for the sake of the body?

What prevents you from living the way you hear other believers living? Or living in the way you read the Word say we should?

Break free from those chains! Have Christ come in and set you free. Ask him to come to the place where you sit and learn and to heal you from the lies, the fears, the legalism, the hypocrisy that keep you bound up, so that you can live in the freedom he died to give you.

*Thank you, Father, for offering a way out of bondage. Search me and help me to see the things that keep me enslaved, the things that keep me from serving you and others in the love and freedom you provide. Break me out of my prison, break my chains, untie my heart and hands. In Jesus' Name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Worry Or Trust?

Matthew 6:25-34

**Q ... How many times a day to you find yourself worrying about things?**

Worry leads to fear and fear is not of God.

**2 Timothy 1:7 (NKJV) ...** “*For **God has not given us the spirit of fear**; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.*”

Look at what **Jesus** said about worry:

**Matthew 6:25-34 (NLT) ...** “***So I tell you, don't worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food, drink, and clothes. Doesn't life consist of more than food and clothing? [26] Look at the birds. They don't need to plant or harvest or put food in barns because your heavenly Father feeds them. And you are far more valuable to him than they are. [27] Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? Of course not.***

***[28] And why worry about your clothes? Look at the lilies and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, [29] yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. [30] And if God cares so wonderfully for flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow, won't he more surely care for you? You have so little faith!***

***[31] So don't worry about having enough food or drink or clothing. [32] Why be like the pagans who are so deeply concerned about these things? Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs, [33] and he will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.***

***[34] So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.***”

Concern and worry are different. You can be concerned about something and do the right thing through prayer and trust in God. But to excessively

worry about something is sinful. If you keep on asking the question ... What if? ... you can open the door for anxiety and fear that can paralyze you.

**Dr. William Rice ...** *The antidote to worry is to place your trust in God. Worrying is a practical atheism. Worrying assumes control for things that you cannot control. Worrying never solves one problem.*

**Q ... So how do you put an end to your worry?**

My immediate answer would be to stop watching the news! For the most part it is fear driven! At least limit how much you watch!

Jesus gave a different answer! He says there are a couple of ways to turn your worries into peace.

**Matthew 6:33-34 (NIV) ...** “***But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. [34] Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.***”

1. Began your day by putting God's kingdom agenda first.

If you will start your day by focusing on God and His kingdom as your first priority, then the rest of your day and life will fall into place. That doesn't mean you won't encounter difficulties, but it does mean that you will be in a far better position to allow God to help you through your life storm. He can certainly give you wisdom for how to handle your storms.

2. Live each day one day at a time and trust God with tomorrow.

Only God knows what is coming tomorrow. He won't be surprised or overwhelmed by anything. No amount of your worrying will have any effect on tomorrow. NO amount of worry today about tomorrow changes tomorrow ... it only changes today!

Thank God we don't know what is coming tomorrow. Praise God that He already has a plan to deal with it! Put your trust in God and live each day

in His mercy and grace and He will give you what you need to please  
and obey Him.

*them into Your peace that passes all understanding. Help me keep my  
eyes on You instead of the distraction.  
Thank You Lord Jesus!*

~~~~~  
*Lord, You know me and my weaknesses far better than I do. You also
know what I sometimes worry about. Please take my worries and turn*

Pastor Randy Green

Party Time !

Luke 15:10

"In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

When was the last time you went to a party?

In these past few months of social distancing there have not been too many opportunities for social gatherings. Birthday parties, graduation celebrations, wedding receptions, Sunday School and church fellowships - all have pretty much been put on hold.

For many here at Harvest Fellowship Baptist it has been particularly difficult because as we often say; "Fellowship is our middle name."

Of course our last name is "Baptist," and we all know that where two or three Baptist are gathered together there will be a casserole or plate of fried chicken in the midst of them.

We like to be together and fellowship, and often that fellowship includes something to eat and drink!

It is interesting that Jesus' first recorded miracle (John 2) occurred at a wedding feast in Cana in Galilee - a social gathering, a celebration, a time of fellowship... a party. There are numerous deep theological truths that can be derived from this passage where Jesus "turned the water into wine," but one thing I confess I had not noticed before - the water jugs.

"...six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing," John 2:6

These jars weren't even supposed to be used for wine! They had a much more "religious" purpose: *"ceremonial washing."*

Jesus took these ceremonial vessels, used for ceremonial washing - requirements of the old covenant, and gave a foreshadowing of the new covenant which would be established as He shared another time of fellowship three years later with his disciples.

Gathered with his disciples in the upper room on the night of his betrayal, Jesus took the cup of wine and said:

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Luke 22:20

And it is because of that new covenant, that shed blood of Christ as it was poured out on the cross for the forgiveness of sin, that washing which is so much more than ceremonial - that even during this time where social gatherings and group celebrations are restricted, there is a party going on!

"In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

There have been celebrations in heaven all throughout this pandemic as God has used even this crisis to bring lost souls to Himself.

I shared a number of weeks ago how we have heard of story after story of how the gospel message is being presented and shared in ways like never before. Numerous testimonies of people who routinely do not attend church who are now tuning in to online services, devotionals and Bible studies - and coming to saving relationship with Jesus Christ - Party Time in heaven!

Pastor Randy has shared how he has been doing a lot of counseling over the phone, and how just last week he was able to lead someone that had called him pretty much "out of the blue" into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Party Time!

As disappointing and difficult as this time has been for so many with the cancellation or postponement of all sorts of events that had been planned and so looked forward to, there is still;

"...rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God."

May we all do our part to keep that party going on!

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Pests Everywhere!

Ephesians 4:27

I've been working on my lawn for a long time. And I've spent a lot of money trying to get my grass to look nice and to stay green. I've tried different kinds of grasses, different amounts, keeping a regular seeding and fertilizing schedule and reading and applying lots of different blogs and books to help me learn about how to plant, grow and keep a nice lawn.

Apart from the heat and all the trees, my greatest struggle is the ongoing battle against moles and voles.

Pests.

Yesterday I was at the hardware store looking at something to get rid of them and a young man walked up and picked up a bag, muttering, "I hate these things."

We talked for a moment about our struggles, chose our weapons and returned home to vanquish our enemies.

Or maybe not.

Hopefully.

No matter what I read, the theme is the same: "Get rid of the food, get rid of the pest."

As a result, while I did get some mole deterrent, I also got grub killer.

I need some grub killer for myself. Hang on, maybe that didn't come out right. What I need is something to kill the food for my enemy, the devil, the roaring lion, the accuser of the saints.

Ephesians 4:27-- *Do not give the devil a foothold.*

Sounds simple enough. But it's not. This direction from Paul is in the middle of a list of behaviors and attitudes the church at Ephesus keeps and employs. Paul's response is, "Knock it off, you're only feeding the enemy. Starve him."

We all have things Satan uses against us, things that give him a foothold in our lives that allow him to hang out and destroy us.

Several years ago I took some students to a camp and one of the things we did was spend a day rappelling and rock climbing. When the counselor was telling us about rock climbing, he pointed out hand- and footholds and all of us were saying, "No way! How are we supposed to hang onto that?!"

The point is that experienced rock climbers have learned how to find the smallest of holes and protrusions and grooves to grab onto and pull themselves up. They look for a trail and find their way as they go, always looking for the next place to grab and make progress.

Satan works the same way. He doesn't need much to hold onto; in fact he needs surprisingly little.

When Paul says not to give the devil a foothold, we need to keep in mind that we have to get rid of EVERY LITTLE thing that the devil can use to gain ground in our lives. Thoughts, habits, attitudes, pride, are all things that the devil holds onto and uses to pull himself ahead in his effort to destroy us.

Granted, my lawn doesn't look like I had hoped, but I have a couple of options; I can shrug it off,

give up and enjoy my barren tundra of a "lawn" or I can continue to fight.

This morning I woke up early, got out the lawn spreader and deployed my mole repellent AND grub killer. I can't do anything about the heat and the trees. Those are just part of the ongoing battle for a nice lawn, external forces that demand attention, but ultimately can't do anything about.

But the pests; those I can conquer. If I can get rid of those burrowing rats, I'll be happy with that victory. At least for now. And the only way to get rid of those tunneling vermin? Starve 'em.

Just like I need to do with the roaring lion.

Father, thank you for your Word, that gives us a look at how to defeat our enemy in battle. Help me to see the footholds, no matter how small, that allow him to make progress in destroying me. Give me the courage and conviction to eliminate them and keep me close to You and to call on you, the Author and Protector of my faith. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Love That Never Changes!

Romans 8:31b-34

Romans 8 has been rightly called the crown jewel of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. Notice how Paul begins this section of Scripture ...

Romans 8:1-2 (NLT) ... "So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. [2] For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death."

... that profoundly means that anyone who puts their faith and trust in Jesus Christ is forgiven and immediately made right with Almighty God.
... in His love ... God chose to save us from the consequences of our sin and the condemnation we all deserve as sinners!
... Praise God for His grace and mercy!

Now take note of how Paul ends this chapter ...

Romans 8:38-39 (NLT) ... "And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. [39] Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Christian, God loves you unconditionally and that will never change!

Sandwiched in between is the amazing reminder that God spared nothing in order to redeem us back to Himself! He graciously gave His one and only Son to die in our place and take the condemnation we deserved! The reason that God did that for us was to reassure us of His unending love for us! Think about it ... why would God who held nothing back to rescue us from death, sin, and Hell ... why would He not provide all of the things we really need out of His abundant resources as well? The answer is ... He will and He does!

That's what God does! ... He doesn't give us everything we want or pray for. He gives us what we need to become what He desires for us to be.

Philippians 4:18-20 (NLT) ... "At the moment I have all I need—more than I need! I am generously supplied with the gifts you sent me with Epaphroditus. They are a sweet-smelling sacrifice that is acceptable to God and pleases him. [19] And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus. [20] Now glory be to God our Father forever and ever. Amen."

Q ... How much trust do you have that God loves you and is for you?

Reflection: ... if God met you in your greatest need ... to have your sins forgiven and be reconciled back to Him ... will He not also meet all your other needs as well? ... YES!

Here is the real beauty in this spiritual truth: ... not only will God do it for you, but He will do that for anyone who will put their trust in His Son Jesus Christ.

John 3:15b-18a (NLT) ... "Everyone who believes in me will have eternal life. [16] For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. [17] God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. [18] There is no judgment awaiting those who trust him."

The old Bible song for children reads ... *red and yellow, black and white, All are precious in His sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

God loves all people!

2 Peter 3:9 (NLT) ... "... he (God) is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish ..."

God is waiting for you because He loves you!

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*Lord, where I have doubted your love, please forgive me.  
Please help my faith in Your goodness and love to grow and never  
waver or diminish because of the trials and adversities that often  
distract me.  
Lord, help us to love each other the same way you love us!  
In Jesus name ... Amen!*

*Pastor Randy Green*

# The Intact God

*Acts 13:36-37*

There has been a lot of talk over the last few decades about whether God is real or not, or what kind of God he is and what he's okay with, doesn't care about, or condemns as sin. The problem with all this talk is that is often prompted by people who don't know or believe in God.

It also follows that some debate the historical reality of Jesus. They wonder whether he was real, said what people say he said or did what they say he did. Part of this argument is that the Bible is unreliable so you can't use it to state your case for the historical reality or teachings of Jesus.

That's right, the witnesses who knew him, lived with him, sat under his teachings, watched him work and saw him after his resurrection, are unreliable witnesses.

Right. That makes sense.

But we DO trust the history of the Bible. It is one of the few historical documents that can be traced copy by copy back thousands of years and later manuscripts will match early manuscripts exactly.

So not only is His Word intact, but the God of the Word is also intact. Wholly. And Holy.

**Acts 13:36-37--** *For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.*

This is part of Paul's address in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Many Jews became followers of Christ that day.

One of the great things about Paul's statement in vv 36-37 was his declaration that Jesus is intact. He did not decay in the grave, but rose from it before the natural course of death could move forward.

God moved quickly, but also honored the tradition he had put in place to honor the sabbath. Jesus did not rise and take off, but waited until the sabbath had passed and met his

disciples the next morning, fully intact. He was so intact that when he walked along the Emmaus road the disciples he met there didn't think anything out of the ordinary until he blessed their meal just like Jesus would do it!

Compare that to Lazarus. When he died, Jesus waited four days to visit Lazarus' family. And they were close friends, close enough that Jesus cried when he heard the news. Jewish tradition, I have read, held that the spirit stayed with the body for three days after death. Jesus visited on the fourth day. He called Lazarus out of the tomb and he came forth, reeking of death. Jesus showed his authority over death and over the spiritual world when he rose Lazarus after four days.

Jesus himself never decayed, never rotted, wasn't dead long enough for that to happen. And despite what people would want you to believe, that same unrotting Jesus has still not decayed.

God is not dead.

God has not changed.

God has not lost any of himself or his power or his authority or his character as time has passed.

He was not a different God in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. Jesus didn't start to exist in Matthew. He was the fourth man in the furnace with Daniel's friends. And further back he was part of the "us" in "Let us make man in our image."

Jesus is unchanging, undecaying, unforgetting.

He is fully intact. He is the same Jesus you called on to save you. He is the same Jesus who has pulled you from messes before. And he is just as strong, just as mighty, just as gracious, just as kind, and just as willing to hear and save as he always was.

*Thank you, Father, for being the same yesterday, today and forever. Thank you that I don't have to worry about how real you are, how sick or how old. I know you are as strong as always and as loving as you've ever been. Hear me when I call and in your strength, carry me. In Jesus' Name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**



## Understand?

Proverbs 3:5

*“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and  
lean not on your own understanding;”*

I recall a time a number of years ago when my daughter and her best friend were struggling with their Algebra homework.

The textbooks were arranged on the dining room table and Dad was summoned to come to the rescue. As I looked at the first problem, with its crazy combination of numbers and alphabet letters, I had to pause, regroup, and confess to my daughter and her friend; “give me a few minutes to re-familiarize myself with this... I haven’t used this stuff in 20 years...”

To which they both replied in perfect unison;  
“That’s exactly our point! If YOU haven’t used it in 20 years, why do WE need to learn it today?”

I answered with a typical parental spiel about “understanding the concepts involved in solving the problem and how that would benefit you in general problem solving scenarios in life.” (blah, blah, blah...)

I’m not sure if I ever sufficiently explained the particular Algebra problem to where my daughter actually understood it, nevertheless she grew up to be one of the best “problem solvers” I know.

In our current situation there are more than enough problems to go around, plenty that need solving.

Whether we are talking about things we can’t physically see such as the sub-atomic elemental structure of a novel coronavirus, or the obvious and often dire consequences of that virus: COVID-19, there sadly still seems to be a general lack of understanding.

Now, I am not knocking learning and striving to understand. We utilize that which we have learned and understand in life all the time. I confess I even use Algebra (  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$  ) quite often in construction when I am trying to lay out a right angle when framing.

We use our understanding to protect us, to help us decipher and solve problems, to plan for our future and even offer advice - to share our understanding with others.

But God’s Word tells us in Proverbs;

*“lean not on your own understanding...”*

In this passage the wise Solomon does not caution against *using* our understanding; he cautioned against *leaning on* - depending solely on - our understanding. Because our understanding can sometimes be flawed.

The Hebrew word translated “*lean on*” is defined;  
*“to rest upon, to rely on, to place one’s confidence solely in”*

Have you ever had a time in your life when you thought you knew and understood something, perhaps because that is what you had always been taught, (perhaps even by an “expert”) and yet at some point you discovered that “*your own understanding*” was in error?

God's Word never tells us to trust in; to *"rest upon, to rely on, to place one's confidence solely in"* our *"own understanding."*

Rather we are first and foremost told to: *"Trust in the Lord."*

God, and His Word are to be the ultimate source of understanding and truth - that which we *"lean on"* - in our daily lives.

As believers God has promised us His Spirit to *"guide us in all truth"* (John 16:13) and we are also given *"the mind of Christ:"*

*"The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ."*

1 Corinthians 2:15-16

The prophet Isaiah wrote:

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*  
Isaiah 55:8-9

Even though we will never fully understand all the mysteries of God, as Christians our understanding can be shaped and guided by the Spirit and Mind of: *"Christ in you, the hope of glory."*  
Colossians 1:27

If, in any life situation, *our* understanding does not mesh or agree with God's Word - guess who's wrong?

*"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;"*

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

# Who Do You Trust?

1 Tim 4:16

When I was in seminary I had one professor for a pastoral care class who said that he liked the idea of the pastoral collar, especially for hospital visits. As a pastor, he said, when you walk into a hospital with a collar on, everyone immediately knows who you are and they respond to you as a minister.

Whether you agree with that or not is not an issue. One of the reasons the Baptist denomination was initially formed and has spread was because they opposed the concept of a "ruling" priesthood. There were doctrinal differences, of course, but there was also the thought that ministers were merely men, nothing more, that for whatever reason, God chose to set aside and to call to lead his people. The priestly garments set apart and in fact appeared to elevate ministers above and away from the people, whether that was true or not.

That said, the priest's collar had become a symbol of someone to trust to care for you, to

bear your burden, to offer guidance, and to lead you to God through Christ. In short, if you saw someone in a priest's collar, you could trust them.

Not so much now.

**1 Tim 4:16--** *Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

Rather than talk about church scandals and abuses, I really think we need to be focused right now on doctrine. This letter from Paul to Timothy reminded him to cling to the doctrine that came through Christ. Almost immediately after this passage, Paul directs Timothy to oppose false teachers.

We all need to be reminded of that. I see more and more believers wandering in larger circles from the core of the faith, even leaving their faith because of false teachers or perpetual immaturity. Much of that has to do with misplaced trust in the title "Reverend" or in priestly collar a teacher wears.

You can get "ordained" by registering online. You can believe and teach terrible lies and be given

leadership in some denominations. Never EVER believe what a religious leader says without checking it against Scripture to see if it lines up. If they don't line up, the teacher is wrong and the Scripture is right. Paul even warned that even if an angel preaches a different gospel than the one true gospel, they will be cursed (Gal. 1:8).

We tend to look for the easiest path so we want to find a church or read a book or listen to a podcast or follow on social media, those who endorse what we feel rather than challenge what we think. We do the same with churches. We want a church that won't ask too much of us. And we want a God who won't.

In this world we have religious leaders denying the deity of Christ, denying the sacrifice or even the historical person of Christ. We have priests who openly practice sexual immorality and whole denominations who endorse it. We have priests who, in full priestly vestments, bless abortion clinics and are celebrated for their compassion. We have pastors who promise God's blessings if you will only give more money or think happy thoughts. They will not denounce sin and prompt repentance that brings redemption.

Woe to those teachers and woe to those who follow!

Let us look past the preacher and the teacher, the priestly collar, neck tie or Hawaiian shirt, to the Savior whose robe is dipped in blood. Let us hold the hands pierced by the nails and kneel at his feet, scarred and sacred.

Let us hold unswervingly to the gospel that has led us to repentance through faith in Jesus Christ and let us boldly proclaim his goodness and offer of forgiveness and new life!

You can trust some leaders to bring you the gospel and to lead you in discipleship, but you must trust the Word of God more than the man who speaks it.

*Father, give me the wisdom to discern who to trust when studying your word. Help me to see the change needed in me and to depend on you to bring it. Thank you for faithful servants who bring your message and help them to hold fast and to proclaim your truth. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Words Mean Stuff

*Isaiah 55:10-11*

If you haven't seen *The Princess Bride* by now, I think you should consider adding it to your watch list or borrow a friend's DVD. This parody of romantic and swashbuckling adventure stories has become a modern classic and people quote from it ALL THE TIME!

One quote that is probably used more than any other is from a character who fancies himself a genius, named Vizzini. Anytime he hears a piece of news that didn't fit his master plan, he yells out, "Inconceivable!"

At one point, one member of his little gang said, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

He was right and we need to be mindful that words still mean stuff. A word is a word for a reason. It is to convey a thought, feeling, concept or thing. We have dictionaries to tell us what words mean and we have thesauruses...es.....es....what's the plural of

"thesaurus"? Anyway, we have those to give us a synonym of a word.

Here's the thing: definitions change. They shouldn't, but they do. Sometimes it makes sense and sometimes it doesn't. For instance, people say "literally" to distinguish an unbelievable, yet true, statement, from a statement of hyperbole. "Literally" is not "figuratively."

Now people use the word so often and use it incorrectly, that the common use has changed and the dictionary has added a new definition to "literally." That new definition is "figuratively." So now literally and figuratively are literally the same thing. Figuratively, of course. They are now words that are empty and meaningless.

**Isaiah 55:10-11--** *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

In this passage in Isaiah, God is calling everyone to himself. In fact, in the NIV, this chapter is called "Invitation to the Thirsty." It's a beautiful chapter and I strongly encourage you to read it and be refreshed.

In vv 10-11, however, God is specifically saying that he sends his words for a purpose and that purpose will be fulfilled. He continues these words of hope in chapter 56.

We live in a time of hope mingled with hopelessness. Let us hold onto hope and hinge that hope on the Word of God. His words still hold their original meaning.

Holiness still means he is incorruptible.  
Loving still means he works for our good.  
Sanctifying still means he cleans us as we go.  
Justifying still means Christ has made us right.  
Grace still means he gives his undeserved favor.  
Forgiveness still means that he wipes out our sin.  
Eternity still means he builds us a forever home.

Let us not think that God is overlooking what is going on around us and ignoring it. His word is alive and well and it will fulfill its purpose. His word in YOU is at work and if you will work with

him, God will continue to transform you into the image of his Son.

We live in a time where words don't mean what they used to, but God's does.

It used to be that a man's word was good enough. Then it took a handshake to seal a deal. Then it took a piece of paper. Then it took a contract. Now it takes a contract, an attorney, and a notary. And it's still only as good as the character of the ones who signed it.

God's character is still the same so his words mean the same as they always have. And in case you're still not sure, he sealed it in blood.

*Father, thank you for keeping your word. Thank you that you continue to speak and to move. It is so easy to get confused as to what a word means any more. Help me to rest in your words, to trust in what you say, and to make my words line up with yours. In Jesus' Name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Understanding Your Trials

1 Peter 4:12-14

I have said through the years to you on many occasions ... that you are either in a storm, coming out of a storm or about to enter a storm. Storms are a part of life and so are trials. Spiritual trials!

**1 Peter 4:12-14 (NLT)** ... “Dear friends, don't be surprised at the **fiery trials** you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. [13] Instead, be very glad—because these **trials** will make you partners with Christ in his suffering, and afterward you will have the wonderful joy of sharing his glory when it is displayed to all the world. [14] Be happy if you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God will come upon you.”

Believers aren't immune to life storms and troubling trials. Just read the Psalms and you will see that king David lived his life in one trial after another. He was always asking God to come to his rescue. His enemies were always out to take his life and steal his throne. And in the midst of it all ... God was shaping David's character with every trial.

The same is true for each of us. Trials are for our good. God uses trials to shape us into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. Trials can make you bitter or better, it all depends on your attitude. We will all have to suffer to some degree so it is important to understand your trials and their purpose. Peter tries to help us better understand them.

1. (12) Peter first tells us not to be **surprised** when trials show up in your life unexpectedly.

The Christian life is certainly not a life of calm seas and great sailing. Knowing Jesus does not give you a free pass around spiritual and physical difficulties. In fact, you are probably going to encounter more difficulties than most unbelievers. We all live in a fallen and sinful world, but as Christians we also have to deal with the reproach of unbelievers. Jesus said ...

**Matthew 5:11-12 (NLT)** ... “God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers. [12] Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted, too.”

2. (13a) Next, Peter strongly encourages us to be **joyful**.

**James 1:2-4 (NLT)** ... “Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be **an opportunity for joy**. [3] For when your faith is tested, your **endurance has a chance to grow**. [4] So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.”

We seldom think about the benefit of trials as being joy that gives us strength, but it does!

**Nehemiah 8:10 (NLT)** ... “And Nehemiah continued, ‘Go and celebrate with a feast of choice foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don't be dejected and sad, **for the joy of the Lord is your strength!**’”

**Patrick Latham** ... *When you quit praising God in the storm, you are likely to quit preserving in the storm.*

3. (13b) Most important, remember **Jesus** and that you are not alone in your suffering.

Praise God, we have a Savior that has already gone through everything that we will ever face. Jesus fully knows what it is to be human. Jesus even died for what He believed was important.

**Hebrews 4:14-16 (NLT)** ... “That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Jesus the Son of God. Let us cling to him and never stop trusting him. [15] This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, **for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin**. [16] So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it.”

Here's the beauty of being a true believer: ... we each have His Spirit living in us ... and Jesus can help us better than anyone to stay strong in and through our storms.

*Please help me to trust you in the midst of my storms and help me to grow to spiritual maturity. Thank you for caring enough to shape my life with your grace and mercy.*

~~~~~  
Lord, I admit that I never relish the thought of difficult times in my life. But I do understand that they serve a good purpose in my life.

Pastor Randy Green

Anchors Aweigh!

2 Cor. 2:10-11

According to what I've read, the term "anchors aweigh", apart from being the Naval Academy fight song and a Frank Sinatra movie, is a report given when the ship's anchor has cleared the ocean floor and the ship is officially underway.

When I was in Boy Scouts I lived in Florida for most of that time and was able to earn my sailing merit badge. We would sail ten-foot boats around in the canals and sometimes out into the Indian and Banana Rivers, but mostly just stay in the canals. When we went into the river, however, we often went as a patrol, a few of us working the mainsail, dropping and raising anchor, raising and lowering the jib or steering the boat. We would be on Mr. Kotch's handmade 27-foot sailboat *Halfdream*. He called it that because he wanted a 52-footer but couldn't afford that so he made one half the size.

When we would go on a camping trip sometimes we would schedule it with Mr. Kotch to take his boat to one of the islands in the middle of the river, which had to be reserved with the Parks Service. We would take off early Saturday morning, sometimes Friday around lunch, and sail for a couple of hours to get to the island. The bridges would lift on a schedule so we would sometimes have to wait an hour or so, along with some other boats and ships. We would lower the sails and the current captain

would yell, "Drop anchor!" and the scout sailor at the bow would respond "Drop anchor, aye!" and drop it over the side. The man at the stern would drop another one so the ship wouldn't drift while we were jumping off to swim as we waited. The horn would blow and we would climb back aboard, man our stations and raise the sails and anchors to continue on our journey.

Great memories. There are all kinds of different anchors: anchors for rocky beds, anchors for sandy beds, anchors for grassy beds, anchors for hurt feelings, anchors for...

Wait. Back up. What was that last one? Hurt feelings?

Yes, holding onto offenses holds us back.

2 Cor. 2:10-11-- *Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

In this passage, Paul is talking to the church at Corinth about a conflict or offense within the church body, not the least of which was a group of people complaining about Paul, and challenging his claim that he was an apostle of Christ. In this passage, Paul is throwing his own forgiveness in with the rest of the church's. The situation arose, was addressed, and Paul prompted the church to move on "so that Satan might not outwit us."

We live in a time where much is made of offense. Forgiveness can be hard to come by, but we are

reminded several times in Scripture to forgive others. Christ commands it, the disciples struggled with it sometimes, and it soon became the cornerstone of their teaching. Forgiveness is about reconciliation, or the restoring of a relationship and position to what it should be.

It is often not easy to forgive. Between you and me, I struggle with forgiveness myself sometimes (don't tell anyone, okay? This will be our secret). That doesn't change the Scripture's teaching on it. Rather than point you to all the passages that talk about it, you can do a search for the words "forgive" and "forgiveness" in Bible software or online tool to get a sense of how important it is to God.

While Paul didn't use the term "anchor", the sentiment is the same. Failure to forgive prevents you from moving forward in faith and opens you up to the devil's schemes. Since he is a liar and the father of lies (think of it this way: every lie was conceived by him), then when you refuse to forgive, you are susceptible to believe lies. This also means you are likely to spread those lies to others.

Charles Spurgeon said, "Refusing to forgive is like drinking a poison in hopes that the other person dies." Someone else said, "Holding on to a grudge is allowing your enemy to live in your head rent-free."

Neither of those sounds very appealing.

In short, if you are harboring bitterness toward someone, commit yourself to forgiveness. Demand nothing less of

yourself, for your own good. What that forgiveness looks like and how readily it comes about may be different. Maybe the relationship cannot or will not ever be restored. Maybe it will take counseling, maybe it will mean having a conversation or series of conversations with that person. Who knows? The issue is that you do not need to be weighed down any more.

Just think how good it will feel to move forward in your life because that bitterness has been cleared and you're anchors aweigh.

Father, thank you that we can be forgiven in Christ. Because of that I know that I can forgive others in the same way I have been forgiven. You and I both know who I am still angry with, what burdens me and weighs me down. Give me the grace to let that hurt go so that I can go forward where you lead. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Belay On!

James 5:19-20

I don't like heights. I never have. I don't even know where that fear came from. I had to face my fear anyway at a youth camp several years ago.

When we lived in Georgia we took our students to a place called Toccoa Wilderness Ministries for camp each summer. At TWM they only took one group at a time, so they focused completely on your group and worked with that group's specific needs and challenges.

The days were tough. Up early for physical training, then clean up and have breakfast before quiet time, Bible study and on to the outdoor challenge.

One of the challenges we did was rappelling. If you don't know what rappelling is, it is descending down a rock face on a rope. Rather than get into the fun of telling my favorite times of rappelling, I will stick to the point: safety.

TWM used a "two-belay system." You would put on your harness, they would clip the rope into your caribeners and they would connect a safety rope. One rope was stationary; that was the rope that would slide through your caribeners and hands as you descended. The second rope, the safety rope, was connected to the harness and someone at the top held wrapped it around their waist and held onto it so that if you lost control they would catch you. They were tied to a tree at the top.

That person is called the top belay. The bottom belay is the person at the bottom who is holding the stationary rope. If the rappeller starts to lose control, the bottom belay can pull on the stationary rope, forcing tension on the caribeners, which will keep you from going anywhere.

In short, if either the top belay or bottom belay doesn't want you to go anywhere you will find yourself stuck on the side of a cliff, unable to move. Even if you pass out from fear, the belays will keep you there for as long as you need, or can control your descent all the way down.

To start a rappel, the top belay would yell, "On, belay!" and the bottom belay would yell, "Belay on!" The rappeller would call out, "Rappelling!" and the belays would answer, "Rappel on!" meaning everyone was ready and the rappel could begin.

James 5:19-20-- *My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

The responsibility of a belay is to prevent the rappeller from being overconfident in his descent. There have been stories of people doing solo climbs who have disappeared for days or have died because of a misplaced grip, misused equipment, and/or overconfidence.

Later this week we'll talk about Aaron Ralston.

Rule number one in most outdoor sports is the buddy system. We had the buddy system in swimming when I was in Boy Scouts. Every so often as we swam in the pool or lake, the lifeguard would blow his whistle and everyone would find their buddy, and hold our clasped hands in the air. If anyone did not have a buddy or could not find theirs, the search was on for a missing swimmer.

Everyone knew that if you were swimming there was some accountability. You were watching out for someone and they were watching out for you.

The Church is the same way. We should not be so naive as to think that we can become a child of God without being held accountable. That should be one of the things we are taught to understand. "If you become a follower of Christ, God is going to hold you to account to break free of sinful habits, and he may use your church family to do it."

What does this mean? It means when we see someone claiming to be a follower of Christ, posting something on social media that is blatantly ungodly, we find a way to address it privately and in love. If we see another child of God involved in dangerous behavior, we call them on it for their own good, to prevent their rate of descent. When we know someone is listening to bad teaching and is adopting poor doctrine we address it with them.

The other side of that, however is that we have to know that we, too, will be held to account. When we clip in to follow Christ, we also are calling out, "I need you guys to keep me from falling!" The truth is neither we nor those

around us will do this perfectly, but that's the deal we make. We'll watch out for each other.

One of the things we were given the opportunity to do was to rappel "Australian-style", which means face-first. It is scarier this way, but in my opinion, is more fun. We went back a few times for day rappels. Steve, the counselor who knew us, was our top belay, but there was a guy we had never met doing bottom belay. Steve knew I would be okay and I knew I would be okay, but when I started running down the face of the cliff, the bottom belay pulled that rope and I jerked to a stop, twisted to the side and bounced off the rock face. I regained my footing and continued the descent. I had a long bruise at my belt line, some scrapes on my arm, and knew I was going to be sore for a few days, but I wasn't mad.

We all laughed about it, but we all knew he was just doing his job of saving my life. If I had a few scrapes and bruises it was a lot better than being spattered on the ground or having several broken bones and internal bleeding.

The point is this: when you see a brother or sister wandering from the truth, belay on!

Lord, thank you for my brothers and sisters who watch out for me. Help me to take care of them, even when it feels awkward for me, so that they can be protected, too, just like I am. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Build it up, point it out

Joshua 4:20-24

People have a lot of different ways to hold onto memories. Especially of important events.

Our daughter just graduated from high school. She has a class ring, a yearbook, her regalia, her senior portraits, her announcements, her letter jacket, her diploma, her graduation pictures and even a sign that went in the yard. As a varsity athlete, they had senior night where she got more pictures and video and a banner that was posted on the fence with all the other senior athletes.

We all have these things: pictures, videos, plaques, certificates, pins, rings, dried flowers, tattoos, commemorative plates, flags, banners, t-shirts, mugs, those tiny spoons mounted on a rack in the kitchen...

You get the point. Memories and reminders are a big thing for people.

And we tend to forget without reminders. We have red marks on our calendars, email confirmations, notifications on our phones, reminder calls from the doctor's office or hair stylist.

When my mother died my brother and I spent several days emptying her house out. In one room we found her old photo albums. We packed them up to bring home with us and we flipped through them. There were

pictures in there going back over a century. My great uncle standing shirtless on the deck of a battleship in World War II (I only knew him as an old man with a big smile and a perpetual pipe in his mouth), my mother's baby picture, my grandparents' wedding picture, plus a ton of pictures of me and my cousins when we were young, playing together at Wichard's Beach. I had forgotten about so much.

Until I saw the pictures and was reminded.

God knows we need reminders. When Joshua was leading the people of Israel into the promised land, he sent them across the Jordan River. God said the priests carrying the Ark needed to go first, but to stand in the middle of the river until everyone was through. The priests walked into the river and the water dammed up, allowing the entire nation to cross over on dry land. Again. When everyone was over, while the priests still stood in the river, Joshua sent one man from each of the twelve tribes, to grab a large stone from the middle of the river and to pile them up as an altar. Once the stones were retrieved, the priests walked out of the river with the Ark and the Jordan began flowing again.

Jos. 4:20-24 -- *And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, 'In the future when your descendants ask their parents, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before*

us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God."

In a time when so many want to remove reminders of our history by changing names or pulling down statues, are we individually doing the same thing? Are we forgetting what God has done for us by dismantling our own reminders?

Honestly, most of us don't dismantle the reminders, but instead we just don't maintain them very well and they start to decay, break apart and fall over. I've never been to Israel, so I don't know if these stones are still there, if they have been replaced with a permanent monument or if someone has used this random pile of stones to build a fence around his goat pen. How are you doing about letting others know what God has done for you? Do your children know your testimony? Have they ever seen your baptism pictures, the Bible you got when you were saved or at your confirmation (if that is a part of your faith heritage)? Have they heard about your scars and how God has brought you through hard times?

The point of our altars is not only so we will remember, but is so we can tell others what God has done. History is His Story. Not ours. Even when God's path intersects with our path, the story of our lives is the story of God's work.

A friend of mine was running along the road and a car went wide on the turn, killing a cyclist and barely missing

my friend. She was terrified to go running again and went to see a therapist for her trauma, reliving the moment every time she drove past that spot. As she and I talked one time, I suggested that maybe she needed to change her perspective on that place. I reminded her of how the Israelites would sometimes pile up some stones and name the place based on God's work there. She gave it some thought, asked her therapist about it, who thought it was a good idea, and went back there, found some small stones in the area, and piled them up while reminding herself that this the place where God saved her life and looked out for her. She said it was a huge help and she was not only not scared of that place, but worshipped when she drove past it!

It's important that we remember what God has done for us and it's important to tell others His Story in our lives. Take some time to build up the altars in your own life. Commemorate God's work, but then make it a point to let others know.

Father, thank you for working in my life. I know I don't always give you credit and I know I sometimes forget. Help me to be more mindful of just how much you do for me. Give me the courage to build altars and to point them out to other people so they can worship you, too. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

What Can We Do?

Colossians 3:9-10

Everyone I talk to about the Lord's work is frustrated because so much of what we used to do ... can't be done right now. We are certainly limited as to how we do ministry. Take for instance ... hospital visits. Pastors can't go into the hospitals to visit and pray with people. That is something that we pastors do here at Harvest. If we know you are in the hospital, we will come and visit with you. And we will pray for you. That is just one of many things that we count as a privilege to do for you.

Many of you have asked me ... *What can we do to help you, Pastor?* Well, there is something that we can all do ... and we need to do far more of it! We can pray!

James 5:16b (NLT) ... *"The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and wonderful results."*

Friends ... there is awesome power in prayer! At a time when so much of what we want to do ministry wise, can't be done ... we can pray! But honestly ... prayer should be our first ministry ... not our last! Paul reminds us that there are three things that we can specifically pray for in relationship to believers and the church:

Colossians 1:9-10 (NLT) ... *"So we have continued praying for you ever since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you a complete understanding of what he wants to do in your lives, and we ask him to make you wise with spiritual wisdom. [10] Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and you will continually do good, kind things for others. All the while, you will learn to know God better and better."*

First, you can pray that God will give each of us a complete understanding of what he wants to do with our lives. You have been uniquely made and gifted to do a work for the Lord that quite frankly, no one else will do or can do but you. God had you in mind for the job before you were ever conceived and birthed.

Ephesians 2:10 (NLT) ... *"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."*

You can also pray that each of us will live a life worthy of the Lord that fully pleases Him. Do people see Jesus living in us? Do our words and behavior reflect the love of the Father to others? When we represent the Father and the Son in a way that brings God honor ... that is the kind of life that is worthy of the Lord. Our chief aim should be to please God. That should be a prayer for all of us!

A third way that we can pray is by asking God to help us bear good fruit in every good work we do. Verse 10 in the (NKJV) reads ... *that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God*. Paul tells us that the fruits of the Spirit are ... love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Walking with God is a choice serious believers make. As we walk with the Lord daily, growing in our relationship with Him, the fruit He wants us to bear will be a natural byproduct of that intimate relationship with Him. ... We can all pray!

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***Lord, teach us to pray ...  
and thank you for the powerful gift of prayer!***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# Making The Most Of Your Time!

Colossians 4:5-6

Each of us are given a certain number of days on earth. Psalm 39:4 (NLT) ... *“Lord, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered, and that my life is fleeing away.”* Well, are you making the most of the time that God has given you?

**Colossians 4:5-6 (NLT)** ... *“Live wisely among those who are not Christians, and **make the most of every opportunity**. [6] Let your **conversation** be gracious and effective so that you will have the right answer for everyone.”*

The Scripture is clear that Jesus made the most of His time on earth redeeming your lost soul. He made it possible for each of us to be saved. Once we have received the gift of salvation that God wants us to have ... He then expects us to redeem our time for His glory.

So the right question to ask ourselves ... is how do we redeem our time? Hold that thought and realize that Paul goes on to address the importance of your speech. Our speech must be redeemed. In other words, we have to make the most of our words. Let me suggest a few things you can do to make that happen:

**1.** Before speaking, always take time to **listen**. God gave us two ears and only one tongue. If we are going to make a difference to the unbelieving community, we have to listen to their story and not try to out story them. If we take time to listen to their story, we can discover their hurts and determine ways we can help them.

**2.** Also be very careful to pay attention to **what** you say. Words are a whole lot more powerful than we think. One of Satan's greatest lies goes something like this ... *Sticks and stone, break my bones, but words will never hurt me.* That's a lie from the pits of Hell. Words have the power to

kill!

**3.** Make it your goal to use **gracious** speech. How many times as a child did you hear ... *If you can't say anything nice, then just don't say anything at all.* What great advice for us all! We all have to remember that for us to speak graciously, we have to have a heart filled with grace.

**4.** It is also important to let your words add **value** to the conversation you have with others. Make your words count! Do your best to avoid idle and unnecessary speech.

**Proverbs 10:19 (NCV)** ... *“If you talk a lot, you are sure to sin, if you are wise, you will keep quiet.”*

**Matthew 12:35-37 (NLT)** ... *“A good person produces good words from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil words from an evil heart. [36] And I tell you this, that you must give an account on judgment day of every idle word you speak. [37] The words you say now reflect your fate then; either you will be justified by them or you will be condemned.”*

**5. Think** before you speak. Always try to speak words that are grounded in truth and love. Paul said to *let your words be effective so that you have the right answers for everyone.* The best way to prepare for that is to immerse yourself in God's Word so that you will know what to say and when to say it.

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Please Lord, take control of my tongue and use it for your glory. Help my words to bless others with truth and love!

Pastor Randy Green

Cut it out or cut it off

Matthew 18:8

On Wednesday we talked about the belay, the person holding the rope so a rappeller wouldn't fall if something happened to them. Then I mentioned the buddy system and how important that is. I said that we would talk about Aron Ralston.

Today we talk about Aron Ralston.

Aron is an experienced rock climber. He's an outdoorsman and spends most of his free time outside. One thing he loves to do is canyoneering. Canyoneering combines several aspects of outdoor sports to navigate passages through rocky terrain. It can include rock climbing, bouldering, rappelling, hiking, scrambling, jumping, swimming, navigating and caving. One of the key aspects of canyoneering is problem-solving. Finding a way over, under and through is part of the thrill and challenge of canyoneering.

In 2003 Aron was canyoneering in Blue John Canyon, Utah, through a narrow passage when he dislodged a boulder, which pinned his right arm against a sidewall several feet up. Aron immediately recognized several problems. First, he was alone. This was not his first solo adventure (nor would it be his last) but in this case, his decision to go alone limited his options.

Second, he was in a remote area with infrequent traffic. Third, this was a day trip so his gear was limited to the basics. Fourth, his food and water were scarce.

For four days he tried everything he could to free himself. He drank little water and ate little food, rationing it out until it was gone. He tried to move the rock that pinned him. He even chipped away at it in hopes that it would crack and break and fall away. But the stones were sedimentary-type, meaning they were essentially sand that had glued itself together over time. All he would accomplish was to shave it off into loose sand again.

For four days he watched his hand die. He knew what he had to do. With only a cheap, now dull, multi-tool, he began the work of severing his arm.

Matthew 18:8-- *If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.*

Aron is the most obvious modern example I can think of, of someone who embodies this teaching. People have different takes on what Jesus was saying here. Some say he was being hyperbolic and doesn't really mean to cut off a body part if it causes you to sin. Some say he was being literal (there are a handful of stories of someone who actually cut off their hand or stabbed out their eyes because of this passage). Like I said, those are stories, and may or may not be true. Aron's story is documented.

Aron had some tough decisions to make and after four days of thinking it through and trying everything else he could think of, he knew what his only options were: cut off his arm or die in this canyon. He actually video taped messages to his family so that he could have last words with them when they found his body.

As far as Aron was concerned, this was literally life or limb.

How seriously do we take our own sin? Whether Jesus was speaking in hyperbole or was speaking literally, his statement is very clear: don't forfeit eternal life for the sake of keeping your whole self intact.

When you think of your whole self, think of your WHOLE self. Everything you are. What is it that gets easily ensnared in sin? Is it the lust of the eyes? Is it pride? Is it a demand for respect? A refusal to forgive? Greed?

Following Christ requires change. When the woman caught in adultery was forgiven, Jesus said, "Go. Stop it." We don't necessarily have to cut off a limb. If we make it a point of living in obedience we can be fully intact. God will work to reshape us regardless.

Cutting off a limb to save your life often means fighting to free yourself from habits that lead to sin. If you are weak in any area of your life, don't just shrug and say, "It is what it is." Ask Jesus to help break you free! Pray, read the Word, read from experts, set up a plan, get accountability. Go as extreme as necessary to break free from the sin that so easily entangles you.

In his book, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, Ralston describes in graphic detail, what severing that arm involved. It was a grueling, day-long process, that took a long time because his tool was dull, and because he often passed out from the pain before waking up and starting again. After 127 hours of being trapped, he had set himself free and hiked out of Blue John Canyon to be rescued.

We have two choices: life or limb. It comes down to this when it comes to sin. Will I cut it out or will I cut it off?

Lord, thank you for your Holy Spirit, which both convicts me of sin and empowers me to overcome it. Thank you that Jesus has redeemed me by his blood. Help me to break free of my sin, even if I have to use extreme measures, I know you will help me. Give me not just the strength, but the courage to remove the parts of me that drive me to sin. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Finding Peace In Jesus!

Ephesians 2:13-14

Paul L. Hahn ... *Walls are designed to separate, and walls can easily represent the fallen condition of mankind. Original sin placed a wall between us and God, between us and paradise. Daily sin erects walls between friends, coworkers, schoolmates, family members, and even nations.*

Hatred has always been like a wall that divided people. In the ancient world there was a real and deep seated hatred that existed between Jews and Gentiles. Their hatred for each other was akin to the racial strife that troubles our world today. Just a different time, a different place, and a different people.

Dr. Bob Pitman ... *Human history has been plagued by such racial strife from the beginning, and it remains an issue today. Education is a good thing, but it has not eliminated racism. Legislation can make laws, but it cannot eradicate racial strife. Even religion cannot stop the animosity that exists between races. Is there any hope? Can different races worship God together, serve Him together, and love one another? The answer is yes!*

The apostle Paul was convinced that it could! In our Scripture for today, Paul reminds us that Jesus is both our Peacemaker and our Peace.

Ephesians 2:13-14 (NLT) ... *“But now you belong to Christ Jesus. Though you once were far away from God, now you have been brought near to him because of the blood of Christ. [14] For Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us.”*

As you can see in what Paul wrote, Jesus brought us near to God and near to each other through His shed blood. Paul reminds us here that Jesus broke down the walls that separate us in our sinfulness from God and each other. To be perfectly clear ... Jesus made us one people.

Ephesians 4:5-6 (NLT) ... *“There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] and there is only one God and Father, who is over us all and in us all and living through us all.”*

Ephesians 2:18-20 (NLT) ... *“Now all of us, both Jews and Gentiles, may come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. [19] So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. [20] We are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.”*

Q ... So what can we do to live out this truth?

We all need to ask Jesus to come live in our hearts and fill us with His love and power.

Jesus has no trouble loving anyone! The key is to let Him live in us and love through us! He certainly wants to love others through us! The more we experience the love of Jesus and share the love of Jesus ... the more peace we can all enjoy!

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***Dear Father, help me to remember that you had to forgive me and adopt me into your family. I was an outsider and unacceptable as a sinner. Help me to love others and be a peacemaker.***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# Error: Connection Not Found

*Isaiah 59:1-2*

Several years ago Heather bought me a fitness watch for Christmas. I loved that watch. It tracked my heart rate, my running distance, calories burned, steps taken and flights of stairs climbed. It let me control the music I listened to by pairing with my phone, told me when a call was coming in and showed incoming text messages on the watch face.

A few months ago I noticed that the numbers on the digital face were hard to read. Within a few days I knew.

The battery was dead. Cue the sad music.

After trying to find the right battery, talking to jewelers and trying to get it fixed I realized the cost and process of replacing the battery (it had been 5 years, after all) was going to be pretty expensive. Heather suggested that it would probably be better to replace the watch with a newer one than to replace the battery on the old one.

That's what we did. We found a great deal on an outdated model, bought it and brought it home to set up.

Uh oh. "Connection Not Found." My watch paired with my phone, but required an app for the pairing to happen. The app connected to a data center "in the cloud". But the data center was down for a few days. My watch could still be a watch; it could still track my steps. But it

was designed for more. Worst of all, support was "not available at this time."

**Isaiah 59:1-2--** *Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.*

Like my new watch, we are at our best when we are connected. For my watch to do it's best work, it needs a connection to the app and data center. For me to do my best work, I need to be connected to God.

My watch has apps that live in it and make it function correctly. Those apps track how I live, send the info to the app on the phone, which tracks the data and shows me where I need to improve, move more, drink more water, eat better, etc.

I have the Holy Spirit living in me, Who tracks how I live, communicates with the Father on my behalf, shows me where I need to improve, move more, drink more water, eat more bread, etc.

In the case of my watch, the connection problem right now is on the side of the data center; The Word makes it clear that when there is a connection problem between me and God, the problem is with me. God doesn't shut down, doesn't sleep, doesn't take vacations or sick days...

I'm told that when a connection can't be found, it is because my sin separates us. It's interesting that Isaiah

writes "Your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." MY sins have hidden HIS face!

I wonder if that's the same thing as avoiding church, prayer, the Bible, and texts from my pastor when I'm living in open sin? Is Isaiah saying that WE avoid God because of our sin? That certainly sounds like something I would do. And I know I'm not the only one.

Really, God displays his desire for a relationship with us all throughout Scripture. His Holy Spirit that lives in us, draws attention to our sin for that very reason; not so that we will throw a blanket over it and hide it, but so that we will see it and remove it. That way it won't stink up the place.

But God's absolute holiness keeps him from being okay with our sin. He can't be a Holy God AND be okay with his children wallowing in their own filth. So he lets us know what we need to confess, he offers forgiveness, we confess and reconnect, and we can move toward all he created us to be and to do.

Even when my watch isn't connected it still knows enough to tell me how my heart is working and how much I'm moving. In the same way, even when I'm not connected to God, I know enough to know what kind of shape my heart is in. But to really get a picture of it I need to connect. I need to be able to track with God the whole pattern of every movement, everything I take in, everything I expend, the words I am told and the replies I give, where I go and when I need to move because I've just been sitting around doing nothing.

As a child of God, there is nothing more disheartening than crying to God, praying for wisdom and finding out that "support is not available at this time."

"Error: Connection Not Found."

The good news is that God is never disconnected. If we want to be connected we can make that happen.

Confess and connect; it's as simple as that.

*Lord, thank you for your Holy Spirit, which helps me keep connected to you. Thank you that conviction is an act of love. Help me to recognize your love when I see it, and to know that when we're not connected, you're waiting for me to plug back in because you're already there. In Jesus Name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

## Keep Your Eyes on the Ball

2 Chronicles 20:12b

“We do not know what to do,  
but our eyes are on You.”

Whether you are talking about a kids first “at bat” at the T-Ball tee, or a major leaguer trying to connect with a 90 mile an hour fastball, the secret of success is the same; “keep your eyes on the ball.” We’ve probably all seen the America’s Funniest Videos clips of the little leaguers taking a swing at the T-Ball with their eyes closed, completely missing the ball and hitting their coach in the knee (or worse) with the bat.

There is another field of operation where it is imperative that the “player” keeps their “eyes on the ball,” because the “player” in this incident is the pilot attempting to land on the deck of an aircraft carrier.

I am told that as an aircraft is approaching the carrier for a landing during night or low weather operations the landing signal officer (LSO) will contact the pilot with the request to “call the ball.” The “ball” in this case is short for the round lighted orange “meatball” on the Optical Landing System. In response to the LSO’s query to “Call the ball,” the pilot will answer by stating his side number, aircraft type, ‘ball’, and fuel status.

It would most likely sound something like this:  
Dallas two-two-one, Tomcat **ball**, five-point-seven.” This translates to: Dallas=VF-1's squadron call-sign, 221=the number on the side of the aircraft, Tomcat=F-14, ball=I see the ball, 5.7=5,700 pounds of fuel left.

At that point the pilot’s primary task as he makes his final approach is to keep his “eyes on the ball.”

Imagine you are the pilot and you are attempting to land your plane on the rolling deck of an aircraft carrier in the middle of the night - in the pouring rain.

The dynamics and mechanics of getting that plane onto the deck of the carrier are extremely complicated, but it all comes down to one request; “call the ball,” and then responding to that request and keeping “eyes on the ball.”

Obviously, most of us will never have the responsibility of landing a plane on an aircraft carrier, but we all face dark times and storms of life where we are looking for a safe place to “land.”

We can turn to a whole host of things to help us make that safe landing, some of which may actually be beneficial. But there is one thing that is absolutely essential, one “secret to success” - keeping our eyes on the Lord.

In this passage from 2 Chronicles 20, Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah was surrounded by a vast army.

*“Some people came and told Jehoshaphat, “A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Dead Sea. It is already in Hazezon Tamar” (that is, En Gedi). Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him.”*

(2 Chronicles 20:2-4)

In the midst of what appeared to be certain calamity,  
Jehoshaphat first: *“resolved to inquire of the Lord.”*  
As part of Jehoshaphat’s prayer he proclaimed his trust in God;

*“If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.”*

(2 Chronicles 20:9)

We certainly seem to be surrounded by calamity these days,  
We have what appears to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century “plague” called coronavirus. Unrest, strife and controversy all seek to distract us from staying focused on the Lord and our role as His ambassadors.

Yet we can profess with Jehoshaphat that when we cry out to the Lord, He will; *“hear us and save us.”*

Jehoshaphat closed his prayer with these words;

*“We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on You.”*

When we don’t know what to do, may we likewise keep our eyes on the Lord, trusting Him for that safe landing place in the darkest storms.

*-Pastor Ronnie Bunch*

# I'm no expert

*Job 38:2*

Every so often I'll rewatch some videos online called "The Breakdown." I like "The Breakdown" because these are videos of experts who critique movie scenes for accuracy.

I've watched physicists breakdown superhero movies, FBI agents do mafia movies; fighter pilots, Marines, ER doctors, mob bosses, jewel thieves, and others have given their experience and training to critiquing these movie scenes.

They all do it in lighthearted ways, sometimes laughing at the absurdity of the way Hollywood portrays the field they clearly know little about. Sometimes, however, they will arch their eyebrows in surprise at the accuracy and will say, "Someone obviously did their research."

A lot of times, even as believers, we tend to not do our research, even about Who God is. We take a teacher's word for it or a pastor's. Or we like to attribute our own preferences for how something should be done, and place those on God as the way the universe SHOULD be run.

Andrew Klavan made the statement recently along the lines of, "At some point you have to stop living as you wish the world were, and live in the reality of how the world IS."

We have to do the same thing with how we view God.

God has revealed himself in a very specific way and has made it clear that he is in unchanging. He refers to himself in masculine pronouns (always). He makes pronouncements about things that he says are absolutely sin and our opinion about that makes little difference. The Lord doesn't seek our approval.

In the story of Job we read that Job feared God, Satan resented it and challenged God that if things got bad enough, even Job would curse him. As we read on we can see that things got REALLY bad for Job. His friends came to grieve with him, but they told him he had clearly done something to deserve it.

Finally God had enough and he asked a question:

**Job 38:2--** *"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"*

To put it another way, God asks Job who is shooting their mouth off about stuff they know nothing about? He uses the word "darken" (or "obscure" in some versions) to speak of confusion. In other words he is asking, "Who is adding confusion by making assumptions when they don't know anything about what I'm doing?"

Most of what we assume about the military or space travel or police work or fighter planes or the mafia comes from movies, tv shows or novels. Unless you are in the actual career field and know that's not how it works. In



other words, if you're an expert you can easily pick apart something if it's fake.

There's a lot of confusion these days about Who God is, what he thinks is okay, what he considers sin, if and how the church should respond, etc. While denominationalism has been an issue for a long time, there were still many things they agreed on and could work together. Now, not so much. In many cases you can't even trust someone in priestly vestments to acknowledge that Jesus is real or that God has more to his character than "love."

So how do we become experts in God?

1. Study his word. Read his biography and his correspondence. In other words, the primary way he has revealed himself to man is the Bible. Get to know it. With so many free resources readily available it is easier than ever for anyone to study the Bible in depth.
2. Spend time with him. I can admire someone because I read his biography, but unless I spend time developing a relationship with him, I still won't know who he really is and I know he won't know me. With God it's different.

There are a lot of lies flying around out there. A lot of things that make us feel better about our own sin because we will have a friend or can find a pastor who will tell us we're not so bad. That may be true. The best way to find out what God thinks about my attitudes and actions is to ask him directly, through Scripture study and through conversations with God. Directly.

When Job was addressed by God, his whole perspective changed. He did not suddenly understand why God did (or allowed) what he did. His grief and sorrow didn't suddenly go away. He didn't gain a clearer picture of the whole world and why everything was the way it was. He just recognized that God knew things Job didn't and God did things that Job couldn't grasp.

God is a whole lot bigger than I am. Do I want to know? Yes. Do I want to understand? Yes. Do I read and study and pray? Yes.

Do I get it?

Sometimes I think so; more often, no.

But like Job, we too can say, "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you."

*Lord, thank you that you do not run the world in the way we would like. I am fickle, wishy-washy, and my decisions will turn on a dime. I am easily swayed in my decisions and I am prone to being driven by my emotions. Forgive me when I am arrogant in speaking of you wrongly. Let me see you more, and whether I understand or not, revel in your goodness to me. In Jesus Name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Independence Day

Psalm 62:7

*"My salvation and my honor depend on God;  
he is my mighty rock, my refuge."*

Today we celebrate Independence Day. The Fourth of July. The date penned on the "Declaration of Independence," the document declaring our independence from Great Britain in 1776. A day where, hopefully, we pause to remember and thank God for the freedoms we as citizens of the United States of America enjoy.

But for the believer it should also be a day where we pause to remember our **dependence** on our God, as well as affirm our **interdependence** on each other.

Let's look at the relationship between:

## **Dependence, Independence and Interdependence.**

Think about those three words and how you might define them in terms of relationships.

We all start out in **Dependent** relationships;  
When we were young we were completely dependent on our parents. They provided us with food, clothing and shelter.

**Dependent** means:

- Needing and relying on others for our basic life needs
- Being unable (or unwilling) to provide for one's self
- Relying on the aid of another for support

As we get older we begin to realize that we may want to assert our own attitudes and behaviors believing that if we are free from others we will be Independent.

**Independent** means:

- Not needing or relying on others for life or relational needs
- Being able to provide for one's self
- Free from the influence, guidance and control of others

However, God calls us to be **Interdependent** in our relationships. Just as the physical body has many parts that work interdependently, so believers are to serve interdependently as the body of Christ... the church.

*"...so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."*

Romans 12:5 (NIV)

**Interdependent** means:

- Committing who we are and what we have to serve others
- Knowing what we can offer to, and what we need from, others
- Enjoying the fruit of diverse gifts operating in harmony

Unfortunately, in the world **Independence** is often equated with maturity. However, in the Body of Christ **Interdependence** is a sign of maturity.

As believers, as the church, we are called to model Christ by "Committing who we are and what we have to serve others."

Our interdependence affirms the value of others, as well as ourselves, realizing the worth of each is enhanced as we live and serve together.

The seventeenth century clergyman-poet John Donne penned these familiar words: *"No man is an island..."* as part of a poem that promotes the idea that no one is truly self-sufficient, everyone must rely on the company and comfort of others to truly thrive.

The conclusion of that poem reads:

*"Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind.  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee."*

As we look around and see the senseless and unfortunate loss of life as a result of both the civil unrest (and the very act that precipitated that unrest) as well as those who have died as a result of the coronavirus, we all are *"diminished"* in some way.

With the Psalmist, may we look to God as our *"Mighty Rock,"* our *"Refuge."*

And even as we celebrate Independence Day, may we also realize our interdependence on each other, and proclaim:

*"My salvation and my honor depend on God;"*

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

## Jesus in the Boat

Mark 4:39

*"Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea,  
"Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a  
great calm."*

If you have lived around this area of Virginia for very long, and have ever spent any time out on the Chesapeake Bay or its tributaries, you probably know that this time of year sudden storms or squalls can arise very quickly.

I recall one particular fishing trip with my Dad and my wife a number of years ago. We had pulled my boat all the way across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel and were hoping to catch some flounder in the creeks and inlets on the ocean side of the Eastern Shore. And boy did we... This was back in the day before the strict limits and restrictions and we were having a good day!

The afternoon was wearing on and we still had to cross the rather substantial Smith Island Bay and Magothy Bay in order to get back to the boat ramp. At some point my wife Debbie nonchalantly mentioned; "Those sure are some dark looking clouds to the north."

But... the fish were still biting...

Before we could catch "just one more" a squall swept down the bay and the placid waters were now churning such that we were literally living Mark 4:37;

*"And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling."*

Yep, we were *"already filling."*

We (somehow) made it to shore on the point of Mockhorn Island and were able to shelter in behind an old WWII bunker. And then, just as quickly as it had come, the storm was over and a peaceful calm returned to the bay, however now it seemed somewhat surreal. Almost frighteningly so.

As I look at the account in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Mark of "Jesus in the Boat" I notice several interesting things.

First off, it was Jesus' idea to go to the other side. The beginning of the chapter tells us that Jesus had been teaching the crowds from this very boat;

*"Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge."*

Mark 4:1

(Sounds like my kind of ministry!)

Then down in verse 35;

*"That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side.""*

Seems like a logical thing to do. We're already in the boat. There are a multitude of people on the shore. Let's just ease on across the lake and find a quiet place to anchor up for the night.

Except that the "lake" was the sea of Galilee. Granted, at about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide it was not a huge body of water like say the Mediterranean or Aegean Sea, but still substantial, and subject to drastic, sometimes violent changes in weather.

Jesus, being fully God and fully man, didn't need to check with Don Slater on the weather app on His iPhone to know that there was a storm coming. Yet still He said, "let's go to the other side... I'm going to take a nap."

But another thing I noticed was in verse 36;

*"Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him."*

Now, as bad as it must have been for the disciples to be in the middle of the storm in their boat, just think of what it would have been like for the other boats. Because they didn't have Jesus in their boat.

Peter and Andrew, James and John were all fishermen by trade. They knew this body of water, and probably, like most all watermen, they knew of people that had drowned in storms just like this. They knew this situation was not good, as surely did the ones in the *"other boats."* In fact by the time they woke Jesus up it wasn't; "Hey Jesus, how 'bout a little help here. Could you maybe grab a paddle, or a bucket and start bailing?"

Nope, it was way past that:

*"Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"*

I have to wonder; why did the disciples wait until they were at the point of perishing before they woke Jesus up?

Maybe it was because this was their domain. "Oh, we've got this, we are seasoned watermen, no need to bother Jesus." And it was not until their boat was about to sink that they cried out, as Matthew records:

*"Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"* (Matthew 8:25)

How often do we have the same mind set; "I got this, no need to bother Jesus." And we wait until *our* "boat" is about to sink before *we* cry out; "Lord save us!"

But, Jesus was in their boat, and he had everything under control.

Literally.

*"He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'"*

(Mark 4:39-41)

Back to that fishing trip 30 years ago. I'm sure glad we had Jesus in our boat that day.

The meteorologist will tell you that this type of squall line that comes in ferociously and then is gone is a common occurrence on the Chesapeake Bay. But on this particular day, and this particular storm, over forty boats were capsized and several people drowned.

You can be sure that Debbie, Dad and I all "woke Jesus up" as we were trying to make our way to a safe shore, and I believe that He is indeed the one who delivered us. All five of us in the boat that day made it to safety: Jesus, Me, my Dad, my Wife and my Daughter.

Oh yeah... I forgot to mention, Debbie was 5 or 6 months pregnant at the time...

*-Pastor Ronnie Bunch*

# He Was Thinking Of Us!

John 17:20-22

*Lord, I have found that I can't live in a right relationship with others without having a right relationship with You. Too often I am more concerned with my agenda than Yours.*

*Please convict me and point out the adjustments I must make to be pleasing in Your sight. Grow me and change me from the inside out to be fully devoted to You.*

**John 17:20-22 (NLT)** ...*"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me because of their testimony. [21] My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father—that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me. [22] I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are...*"

To be thoughtful of others is to be Christ-like. Thoughtfulness characterizes people who consider others first by putting the needs of others ahead of their own. When we choose to do that, we act like Jesus. When the Lord initiated His ministry, He announced that His mission and purpose was to serve others even to the point of giving up His life. The Gospels clearly reveal that Jesus spent His life on earth thinking of others first.

John helps us to see that in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of his gospel. We see Jesus' concern for others in how He prayed. We know that Jesus suffered in agony shortly after He prayed this powerful prayer to the Father. Yet just hours before being crucified, Jesus was thinking of us. He included you and me in His prayer! Jesus prayed: ...*"I am praying not only for these*

*disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me because of their testimony."*

He wanted us to enjoy the unity that He and His Father have. Jesus prayed for us to have a spirit of unity, so that the love we have for each other through Christ will draw a watching world to Him.

Thoughtfulness should be a character trait of each and every one of Jesus' followers. Jesus wanted to showcase His power and glory through us so that others will come to put their trust in Him.

He wanted that so much that He made it a matter of prayer! He specifically prayed that prayer for you and me ... for the Church. He made each one of us different and unique with purpose. He prayed for unity, not uniformity.

At a time when so much of what we did to reach our world for Christ has been put on hold, Jesus' prayer is still being answered and effective. It certainly gets the attention of the lost world when believers stay focused on the Lord and stay unified as a Church by loving each other.

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*Lord, thank you for praying for us even before we were born and please don't stop praying. We need you to help us stay close to you. May your love for us bind us together in oneness of heart and purpose. Thank you for giving us a reason to live: ... to point people to You. Lord, please use our lives to make a difference and change in others.*

*Pastor Randy Green*

# What Treasure Are You Looking For?

Matthew 6:19-21

I have always been intrigued by the prospect of finding lost treasure. It was something that I dreamed about doing when I was young. Even today, I love to watch documentaries that are about diving or digging for lost treasures.

What treasure are you searching for? What is the one thing, person, cause, one treasure that you can't live without? People treasure all kinds of things. Things like cars, boats, jobs, money, homes, land, even people. Jesus was very careful to remind us that one day all these earthly things that we treasure will go away.

**Matthew 6:19-21 (NLT) ... "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty, and where thieves break in and steal. [20] Store your treasures in heaven, where they will never become moth-eaten or rusty and where they will be safe from thieves. [21] Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be."**

As you can see, the only thing that will last on into eternity is the treasure that you invest in for heaven. I have said many times that the only thing you can take into heaven with you are the lost souls that you lead to Christ. So how do we go about storing up our treasures in

heaven? This is how the apostle Paul answered that question:

**Colossians 3:1-2 (NIV) ... "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. [2] Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."**

When you set you your affections on Jesus ... that is when you are storing up treasure in heaven. When you allow your mind and heart to be distracted by the things of this world, that is when you are just wastefully digging for treasure here on earth. Those earthly things that we search for won't last! But when we make Jesus the object of our affection, that is when we are storing up treasures in heaven.

Jesus is a treasure worth searching for.

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Father, I confess that I am not always looking for You in my day. Sometimes I get distracted and go looking for things that will not last. When I do that I know I am wasting the time I have been given here on earth. Please forgive me, and help me to stay focused on You and Your precious Word. You are the greatest treasure and anyone could every search for. Thank You that You are a findable treasure!

Pastor Randy Green

Off the Bottle

Hebrews 5:11-14

I didn't want to bring it up, but because I feel that so many people are insensitive, they haven't noticed. And it hurts. Hurts big time.

I'm off the bottle and on solid foods.

I'm pretty proud of it. No one has been excited for me about it for almost half a century and I couldn't hold my tongue anymore. When I first started eating apple sauce, then up to cheerios and diced carrots, my mom would clap and smile. Then it stopped. Even now when we go out to eat I'll order chicken or even steak, will chew it up and swallow it and even my own wife won't applaud my achievement.

What is with people?

I'm beginning to think people just EXPECT me to be able to eat solid foods, what with having done it for so long. In fact I think they would think something was wrong with me if I couldn't eat solid foods.

I know when my dad had mouth and throat cancer he had a feeding tube implanted as he went through radiation treatment and he would pour nutrition drinks into the tube. But that was because his body didn't work quite the way it was designed to due to both the cancer and the cancer treatment.

Unless something is not working properly, adults, mature people, eat solid foods.

Heb. 5:11-14 -- *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

Those who are spiritually mature understand the harder things of Scripture, the more difficult parts of theology, and are more sensitive to God's leading in everyday situations.

Recently, the frontman for a Christian band announced that he no longer believed in God. He posted his reason, listing some questions that he never found answers to. When I read the questions, my thought was, "These are beginner Sunday school questions." It may sound harsh, but if you have been a Christian and have been trying to understand God and His Word, the basic answers either (a) come pretty easy, or (b) don't carry so much weight.

A couple of days ago, Don Lemon, CNN personality, in an interview with Chris Cuomo, said Jesus, "admittedly wasn't perfect while he was on earth." Admittedly? Admitted by who? Certainly not Jesus.

Here's my point: Knowing God, even the basics of Christian theology, comes through effort and time, but if you don't get it, it is because "you no longer try to understand."

The writer of Hebrews was telling the readers that many of them should be teachers by this point, but instead they weren't even trying to understand the person and role of Jesus, so they were like little babies and couldn't handle the harder things, the things that require more work to chew on, to swallow and to digest.

The church is ineffective today in large part because we're not even trying. We're not trying to understand, not trying to get to know God, not trying to conquer our sin, not trying to spread the truth of the Gospel.

As a result, we cannot even discern good from evil.

We don't know what's wrong when we see it.

And there's a lot wrong. There is a lot of evil around us and we don't even have what it takes to know it's evil and to call it what it is.

Brothers and sisters, let us not rest on the fact that we go to church sometimes. Let us not be comfortable with our faith because we have a Jesus fish on our car. Let us not say I know my redeemer lives because my coffee mug has a Proverb on it.

Our Redeemer lives because he lives! He is perfect and always has been! His blood is pure and his sacrifice is sufficient to take away our sin and guilt!

We have work to do to understand the Lord, to grasp the truth of his Word, to be in a place to hear and respond to the Spirit. God does not impose himself on us. We must receive his goodness, and take and be filled.

Move on from the milk! Chew, swallow, digest.

Then you will taste and see that the Lord is good.

Father, thank you for the depth of your truth! Thank you that you are so big, so deep, so broad, that I cannot see you in one frame, but must spend my life putting together a full picture of who you are. Give me a desire to pursue the answers to the harder truths, that I may grow, mature, and understand. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

I'm on restriction. Again.

Matt. 7:14

When I was growing up I was on restriction. A lot. Like, all the time. I spent about half my young life "earning" extra chores, not allowed to go anywhere and not allowed to watch tv.

That was the term my dad used: on restriction. Many people use "grounded", which is an aviation term for pilots who are not allowed to fly for a time due to health issues or administrative action. My dad, however, used "on restriction." My life was restricted. My freedom to live my life was based on the parameters my father set.

In that case it was a punishment. In the teachings of Jesus, however, restrictions demand the power of God to overcome.

We've all heard the term "straight and narrow." We have this image of a straight road or path that following Christ puts us on. But Jesus never said anything about "straight and narrow." He said "strait and narrow."

Matthew 7:14-- *Because strait [is] the gate, and narrow [is] the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*

That's not a misprint or a typo. It doesn't mean that the authors don't know how to spell or that the spelling of

the word "straight" changed over time (like "fyre" and "fire"). They are different words with different meanings.

Straight means "without bend, angle, or curve".

Strait means "narrow, affording little space, confined in arena"

Following Christ means that it is a tiny little window to gain access and a skinny little path to stay on. To put it another way, no you cannot claim to be a Christian and do and say whatever you want. Being a Christian, following Christ, claiming him as your Lord, means you are leaving the stuff you've always done or always wanted, the desires you've always held, the priorities you've always kept to, and giving Jesus the authority to reorder your life in exchange for forgiveness of sins and eternity in heaven.

This may mean that you can't go the same places with your friends, keep the same habits, speak to people the same way, cheat your customers for a buck, mistreat the wait staff at a restaurant, date the same kind of people you always have, eat or drink the same stuff you used to, tell the same jokes, use the same language... you get the point.

Don't worry, though, those aren't changes you have to make in order to decide to follow Christ. Those are the things Jesus works through with you over time, but make no mistake, he will demand change. Even the freedom in Christ is restrictive.

"The way is narrow" means you will come to points in your journey where Jesus will say, "okay, to squeeze through this part of the path you will need to drop a couple of old habits, suck in your gut and go through sideways."

Mat 19:24-26-- *And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. When his disciples heard [it], they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? But Jesus beheld [them], and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.*

Some people have said Jesus was talking about a small gate in the city called "The Eye of a Needle" that a camel could get through if they were unpacked of their burden, got down on their knees and squeezed through. I've taught this before. Others say the word for camel (kamelon) was mistranslated from the word for "thick rope" (kamilon), but that is only the case in 2 manuscripts from one region. The other thousands all say the same thing.

In short, it is impossible to follow Christ unless God is the one who brings you to it. No amount of struggle, effort, self-denial, good works, money in the offering plate, charity work, kind words, thank you notes, begging and pleading on your death bed, will get you into a relationship with God, and therefore into heaven, without surrendering to Christ.

If you listen to a teacher or a preacher who tries to tell you otherwise, shouldn't be considered a teacher or preacher.

Yes, following Christ is restrictive. But Jesus has a lot of work to do in those who choose to follow him. He actually has a lot of work to do in everyone, but not everyone is willing to follow him.

What about you? Are you someone who claims the name of Christ as your Lord? If so, are you setting things aside as Jesus leads you? Does your life look different than it did a couple of years ago?

Andrew Klavan made a point this week on his podcast: "Morality is not necessary for us to do what we want. Morality keeps us from doing what we want because our nature is impulsive. Morals help us control ourselves."

Jesus didn't come to make you happy; he came to make you holy. Being transformed into the image of Jesus is hard, but God gives us what we need to make it happen.

Father, thank you that you love me as I am, but you love me too much to let me stay this way. Thank you that you provide a way to heaven at all, even if it's restrictive. Help me to drop my burdens and squeeze through the skinny gate and walk the narrow path. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Plan B is Plan A

Col 2:2

Most of us have summer traditions. We have a house that we rent (or own) in Nags Head. Or a July 4 bbq with the family or neighbors. Maybe we have an RV trip we take with the family for a month. In our case we usually take a ten-day jaunt to Cabo and tell everyone we are visiting Heather's family.

I kid!

Our summers are usually filled with a boost in student ministry activity, local days at the library, youth camp, VBS, a trip to visit Heather's family and a couple of day activities we do as a family.

This summer may seem like a plan B summer because we had hoped to be able to do all the stuff we usually do, plus a possible second trip since family was going to come for graduation. But, alas, it was not to be.

The truth is, however, that in my mind, Plan B and Plan A have traded places because we had enough notice that this Covid-19 thing was going to mean long-range changes, that I was hesitant to plan many things, knowing I could add them quickly as businesses reopened and contagion dropped or whatever. That means that (apart from canceled youth camp), plan A was to wait and see and Plan B was to fill the calendar.

How many times have you been asked, or maybe have just wondered, if Christ was Plan B?

God created this perfect world, made a perfect garden with everything anyone would need, put people in the garden and gave them a command not to eat of ONE tree. But they were tempted, they ate, and they got the boot. But God told them salvation was coming. Jesus was Plan A.

1 Pe 1:19-20-- *It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. God chose him as your ransom long before the world began, but he has now revealed him to you in these last days.*

Before the world began, God chose Jesus to be your salvation, to redeem you, to set you free. Even though he wasn't revealed to be that plan until thousands of years later, he was ALWAYS that plan.

Look what Paul wrote to the Colossians:

Col. 2:2-- *I want them to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. I want them to have complete confidence that they understand God's mysterious plan, which is Christ himself.*

God's plan for you is Christ himself.

WOW!

"God's plan" means the all-powerful, all-knowing God of all things, the creator of the universe and every detail of it, mapped out a timeline of history.

"For you" means that YOU are included in God's timeline of history. He has worked things together so that YOU would have the opportunity to know about Jesus, to receive God's grace, to place your trust in Jesus so that you could have a forever family and a forever home with God.

"Christ himself" means that GOD'S plan for YOU is CHRIST. It is not being nice or fighting injustice or making money or living without struggle. God's plan for you is Christ!

The question is, "Is Christ YOUR plan?" Does Jesus fit in your plan for your own timeline? Does he fit in your schedule? Does his name even come up in your day?

Do you call on him only when you're in a bind or do you greet him when you get up in the morning? When you find yourself in the quiet, do you take any time to speak to him or to listen to him?

Is Jesus your plan A? Your plan B? Is he in your plans at all?

God has given you a lot of thought. Give him some thought today. Don't relegate Jesus to "when I get a chance" or "if something comes up."

Make God's Plan A for you, your Plan A:

Christ himself.

Father, thank you for thinking of me even before the world began. Thank you for making Jesus your plan for me. Help me to make Jesus my Plan A, not just today, but every day. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

The Power of Praise

2 Chronicles 20:21b

“Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.”

Earlier this week I shared a devotional from the 20th chapter of 2 Chronicles. As I continued reading through that chapter I once again came to a passage that illustrates this divine truth: There is power in praise!

Secular psychologists recognize the importance of praise. Both children and adults need positive reinforcement and encouragement in order to feel appreciated and valued.

The 19th century philosopher William James, considered by many to be the father of American psychology stated; “the deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated.”

You can give a simple praise to a child and watch them soar, and we all know how a simple “thank you” can make our day. The power of praise.

But the power of praise recorded in the 20th chapter of 2 Chronicles is altogether different. It is the praise we as humans are *allowed* to offer up to the God of the universe. Unlike the child who craves the attention of positive reinforcement, God does not *need* our offerings of praise, yet joins in our presence through them.

“But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.”
(Psalm 22:3)

When we offer up sincere, heartfelt praise to God, He shows up among us - in a spiritual sense, in a metaphysical sense, and sometimes even in a very real and physical sense. And that is just what he did for Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah as they humbled themselves before Him and offered up their praise.

Recall the situation the people of Judah were facing back in verse 1 of chapter 20;

“The Moabites and Ammonites with some of the Meunites came to wage war against Jehoshaphat.”

God’s children were surrounded by a “vast army” (vs 2)

But down in verse 18 we read;

“Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the Lord.”
(2 Chronicles 20:18)

The people first humbled themselves in recognition of the holiness of Almighty God. The writer of Hebrews encourages us to:

“...so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,”
(Hebrews 12:28b)

Then the Kohathites and Korahites (the worship leaders) began to praise the Lord:

Then some Levites from the Kohathites and Korahites stood up and praised the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.”
(2 Chronicles 20:19)

It sounds like the people of Judah had a “sho’ nuff” shouting service!

The next day, as they prepared to go out to battle:

“Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying:

“Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.”

We here at Harvest are extremely blessed to have willing and dedicated volunteers for our Praise Team, but I have to wonder how many of us (myself included) might be a little more hesitant if part of the team participation conditions included;

“When going into battle Praise Team members will be placed at the front of the army and be expected to offer praise in the face of the enemy.”

But then I thought; That’s *exactly* what we are called to do each week as we proclaim through Praise and Worship the name of Jesus! We too have a very real enemy.

But... we too have a very real God! He promises to “show up” for us just as he did for Jehoshaphath and the people of Judah.

“As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated. The Ammonites and Moabites rose up against the men from Mount Seir to destroy and annihilate them. After they finished slaughtering the men from Seir, they helped to destroy one another.

(2 Chronicles 20:22-23)

In response to their offering of praise, God fought the battle for them. Some commentators and Bible scholars believe that the phrase; *“the Lord set ambushes against the men...”* actually refers to angels ambushing the approaching enemy armies.

I can almost envision a comedic scene as unseen angels are taking pot shots at the approaching enemy as they make their way up: *“climbing up by the Pass of Ziz.”* (vs 16)

Similar to God’s intervention in Gideon’s day, God caused confusion among the enemy, who turned upon themselves and slaughtered one another such that their destruction was complete before Jehoshaphat and his army even met the enemy. Just as God had promised:

“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.”
(2 Chronicles 20:17)

As our world, our country, and even our own state seem to be turning farther and farther from God’s truth, we too are called to: *“Take up your positions; stand firm...”*

“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.”
(Hebrews 13:15)

And may we join with the voices of praise and worship from the heritage of our faith and:

“Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.”

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Safe

Psalm 4:8

*"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in safety."*

There seems to be a lot of concern about safety these days.

Of course we all are aware of the "safety protocols" that have been put in place by various organizations - governments, businesses and other entities - to try to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

We here at Harvest Fellowship have tried to be prudent and responsible as we have come up with our own safety guidelines for assembling together. We have been enjoying our times of praise, worship and fellowship these past few weeks, and Randy definitely prefers preaching to a real live congregation rather than strategically placed stuffed animals.

Yet even so, there still seems to be much uncertainty about just what lies ahead... or so it would seem if you listen to a steady stream of news reports. Statements about record numbers of positive testings for the coronavirus in various states have many people still feeling vulnerable.

Reports of social unrest have others wary of venturing too far from home lest they become the victim of some random act of senseless violence. These are the narratives that are being presented over and over again on the various media outlets. And if that's not bad enough, you don't even get a break during the commercials!

Is it just me or does it seem like every other commercial nowadays is for some type of safety product?

Whether it is home security, cyber security, identity theft security, invisible fences for our pets or extended warranties for our automobiles, there seems to be an endless supply of "safety" for sale. And who doesn't want to feel and be safe, especially during these times?

I came across this quote the other day;

"Trying times can make us feel insecure, but our security isn't found in our culture but in our Savior."

Our culture today appears to be determined to promote a society and sense of insecurity and uncertainty. (For whatever reason...) But as believers in Jesus Christ our Savior we have the peace and security promised to us in God's Word. The peace that Paul wrote about in his letter to the Philippians;

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 4:7

The security spoken of in the Book of Job;

"Yet if you devote your heart to Him, and stretch out your hands to Him..."

You will be secure, because there is hope; you will look about you and take your rest in safety.

You will lie down, with no one to make you afraid..."

Job 11:13,18-19

Sadly today, there are people who do not feel safe in their own homes or neighborhoods. They are not able to;

"lie down, with no one to make you afraid..."

There are others who are not comfortable venturing outside of their homes as they *“look about”* at all the perceived and promoted dangers, both seen and unseen. And who can blame them when we are constantly bombarded with an endless barrage of: “things you need to fear.”

But again, God’s Word reminds us that:

“...God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” 2 Timothy 1:7

Other versions translate *“sound mind”* as: *“self- control,”* or *“self-discipline,”* or *“good judgement.”*

What I believe God is saying is this: we don’t have to live in fear... but don’t be stupid either.

I have often used the phrase “stay safe and well” when closing out emails or devotionals over these past few months and I’m sure we are all trying to do just that, as much as it is within our own power. But we also must affirm where our peace and safety ultimately come from as we proclaim with the Psalmist;

“In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.”

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Sunscreen, Lenses, Filters

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

It's summer. Summer means sunscreen and sunglasses. Umbrellas, hats with brims, and choosing to get "out of the sun" even when you are out in the sun.

These are all good things. Sunlight is good for us. It's a disinfectant, provides us with Vitamin D, and boosts our mood through prompting the brain to release serotonin.

Too much sun, however, can lead to sunburn or even skin cancer. Being in the heat can lead to dehydration. Hence the constant push for sunscreen to block out harmful ultraviolet rays, sunglasses to protect your eyes, and hats with brims to keep the direct rays of the sun off your head and face.

Even though we know the risk of being out in the sun, with few exceptions we want to be out in it anyway because it's an enjoyable place to be. When I worked as a courier while I was in seminary, a couple of times a week I had to make deliveries or pick up packages from a specific address and it was made very clear to me that I had to go after 2pm. The client had solar urticaria, or a severe allergy to the sun.

Her curtains were always drawn and she lived in a townhouse. She had us come in the afternoon because the sun was on the back of the house at that time and the front porch cover provided some shade to help

protect her. Even so, she opened the door a crack to hand me an envelope or to receive the envelopes I would bring for her. My heart always sank when I saw her address on a call. I felt bad for her and still do when I think of her.

In the same way that we have to take precautions when we are in the sun, we have to respond to the world around us with filters and lenses as well. If not, we could ultimately become severely burned and/or have long-term effects as a result of our overconfidence.

Deut. 6:4-9-- *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

This passage is called the *Shema*. The word *shema* means "to hear or to listen." There's a lot more to this passage and to the others that accompany it, but I want to focus on the commands God gives to the people, about halfway through in vv 7-9. He says, *Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

Here's what he says about the commands of God:

1. Impress them on your children (pass them on so that they become a part of your children' identity)
2. Talk about them at home
3. Talk about them away from home
4. Talk about them at bed time
5. Talk about them when you arise
6. Tie them to your hands
7. Tie them to your forehead
8. Write them on your doorframes
9. Write them on your gates

To put it in another way, "Whether your at home (doorframes) or out (gates), whether you're going to sleep (lying down) or awake (getting up), know and live these commands."

Moses starts out telling them to have conversations at home about them all the time, teaching your family to know the Lord and to follow him. Then he talks about symbols.

The religious men wore phylacteries, little boxes with scrolls of the Law in them, especially at morning prayer. They also wore them on their arms. On their doorposts they have a mezuzah, a box with the law on a scroll.

Why is this important? Well, look at the world around us. Look at what is going on. It is so easy to lose hope, it is easy to believe lies being told, it is easy to become anxious or afraid if we just look at the blinding light and feel the oppressive heat of the fires burning around us.

We need a filter. We need a lens through which to see the world and still know we are protected. That lens is the Word of God. We are to know it and live it. We are to read it and talk about it.

When I read the shema I look at the imagery, especially in the second half. "Tie them to your head" looks like, filter your thoughts through the Word, and let the Word be the filter that the news and social media has to be filtered through before it gets to your mind. "Tie them on your hands" looks like when you reach out to act, you see a reminder of the word. Does your action match the Word of God? Are your hands doing the work of the Lord?

"Write them on your doorframes" reminds me to filter my family decisions through the Word. "Write them on your gates" tells me to take the Word of the Lord with me wherever I go as I enter society.

We have the chance to be scared or angry or bitter. But are we filtering the world through the Word or are we going to just take our chances?

Father God, Help me to see the world through the filter of your Word, that no matter how hot it seems I know I am protected. Give me the courage to hear, to see, to speak and to act for the glory of My Shield and Defender. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

The Rest of the Story

Hebrews 4:1-2

I already know whose voice you heard when you read that title.

When I was growing up and my father had on talk radio, often we would hear the voice of Paul Harvey come on and briefly share a story of Americana. And naturally, he would end every story with his famous closing line, "I'm Paul Harvey. And that is the rest.....of the story."

As believers, and as those investigating the faith to see if we want to be called believers, to bear the name "Christian", we want to know the rest of the story. We have a tendency to see trusting Christ as trading a list of wrong things we do with a list of right things to do. Our burden isn't lifted, it's just different. In some cases it seems like we have little burden without Christ, but once we decide to follow Christ we are suddenly told "change your whole life RIGHT NOW!! DO IT!!"

Very appealing.

Jesus, however, says, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." He does not say we will not have responsibilities. What he says is that our responsibilities will be custom made for who Christ has made us to be. We receive gifts and we have talents and we have abilities. Those are not random, but are instead distributed specifically.

Even so, that is not what the writer of Hebrews tells us. For a full context I encourage you to go read all of Hebrews 4 (or even better, Hebrews 3 and 4).

Heb 4:1-2-- *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed.*

As the students know, any time the word "Therefore" starts a passage you are reading, you should read the previous few verses to see what the word "therefore" is there for. In this case, the author points to the exodus from Egypt and to those who, even seeing God's power, his wrath on Egypt, his mercy on Israel and his provision for his people, still many did not believe.

They did not enter rest in Promised Land.

But we are told to enter God's rest. Enter it. That means to voluntarily choose to move into God's rest. It is not foisted on us. It is not demanded. We are not coerced. It is offered, but we must move into that rest of our own accord.

Puritan commentator John Owen says rest for the believer includes (1) peace with God, (2) freedom from a bondage-like spirit of worship and service to God, (3) deliverance from the burden of Mosaic law, (4) freedom to worship according to the gospel, and (5) rest that God himself enjoys.

Like those before us, we have had the opportunity to hear the gospel proclaimed to us and have been given the opportunity to respond. But it is those who have obeyed, those who have mixed the hearing of the word of God with their faith to receive it, that have entered that rest.

When we turn on the news we see unrest all around us. We can become anxious and worried, afraid and in some cases we can feel like there's much to do, but we are ill-equipped to do it.

I hear stories of churches who do not plan to open their doors for a year or more, many of them with no way or maybe with no will to find a way to feed their sheep. And I'll be honest, when we were not meeting, the pastors and praise team would record worship during the week and post it online with a schedule to go live on Sunday, I was able to enjoy Sunday breakfast with my family. I could get up at 8:30 instead of 6:30, and make eggs and bacon and waffles before getting my family up for worship service online. And I could go to church in my pajama pants.

And I could rest. And it was nice. For the first time in my life I understood the relaxing Sunday.

But I missed the church family, the live worship, the gathering together and I missed the rest, as in the sense of peace I felt. Maybe I needed that time away to help me appreciate how energizing and encouraging and even restful gathering as a church family can be.

It's not a burden OF worship, it's a freedom TO worship. It's a time of rest.

What burdens do you carry that are not yours to carry? What keeps you from resting? What keeps you from trusting in God and entering that rest that he offers? We all have those things and we all things to lay down, things to address, things to unshackle from our souls.

Following Christ isn't about exchanging one list for another. It's not about adding things to a list you already have. The gospel is about peace. And it's about rest. God rested after he created the world. He created a place of rest for the nation of Israel. Jesus sat down after his work on earth was done. Surely you need some rest, too.

"I'm Art Stafford. And that is the rest.... of the story."

Lord, thank you for offering me rest. I know that I carry so much that is not mine to carry. Help me to rest in you, to see that you offer me peace, that the work of redeeming me is finished. Lead me to trust in you so that I can rest in you. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Time - Out!

Matthew 11:28

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest."*

Time - out!

If you are on a sports team that is losing to your opponent these words signal not only a break from the action, but also a time to refocus.

Rather than leave their team on the court or field when they are behind on the scoreboard, especially in the final minutes of play, a coach will call a time out to remind them of their "game plan" and redirect their strategies for winning.

We have probably all seen instances where just getting the team off the field or court seems to turn the tide of the game, and what seemed like a sure win for the leading team turned into an upset victory for the other.

But for the players, this time-out also serves as an opportunity for a few moments of rest. A chance to catch their breath. Sometimes just that momentary break, to stop, and breathe, is all that the athlete needs to carry them through the end of their game.

There are days when we all need our coach to call a time-out.

During times of stress and conflict such as we are seeing all around our nation today, wouldn't it be great if God just stepped onto the court and said; "Time-out!" ?

It is in times like this, where our opponent seems to be winning with schemes of divisiveness and confusion, that we need to "huddle up" with God and allow Him to remind us of His "game plan" and our purpose and strategies for realizing the victory that has already been won through Christ.

God invites all of us who are wearied and burdened by all that is going on to come to Him and to stop, to breathe, and to rest.

In Psalm 62 David wrote;

"Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him."
(Psalm 62:1)

As we realize that our salvation comes from God, and that we can rest in Him and the relationship we have with Him through Jesus Christ, may we take the "time-out" to remember and refocus on this truth, whatever our current situation may be.

Charles Spurgeon once said; "You may have no joy in your situation, but you can still rejoice in your Savior."

The Savior who invites us, and promises us... rest.

Who knows if we are anywhere near the final minutes, or even final quarter, of all the chaos and uncertainty of this season in our lives?

For that matter who knows if we are in the final minutes, days, or season of God's ultimate plan for mankind as prophesied in His Word?

Either way, these can be weary and burdensome times. Times when it may appear that we are losing. Times when we need to hear... and heed the words and promise of Jesus when He says:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Tracking the Virus

Romans 5:12

“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.”

Remember the good old days when we were more concerned about our computer being infected with a virus than we were about actually contracting the coronavirus ourselves?

We have probably all heard of, or even had, experiences where opening that one innocent looking email, or clicking on that seemingly legit link led to a “virus” or some other form of “malware” (I think that stands for malicious software) “infecting” our computer. At that point we wanted to, as quickly as possible, retrace the steps that lead to the origin of the “infection” so that we could warn others, as well as never go there again.

With the coronavirus still “out there” and the subsequent COVID-19 (**CO** rona, **VI** rus, **D** isease, 20 **19**) that it causes, we certainly do not want to “go there!” But for those who are unfortunate enough to actually test positive for the virus there is a great emphasis placed on tracking the source or origin of infection. This is done so that others who may have “gone there” can be warned, screened or even self-quarantined.

Sometimes this may be taken to an extreme. I recently heard of an individual who was sent home from work to self-isolate because the SON of someone he MAY have interacted with at work tested positive for coronavirus... ? ...

Obviously, none of us want a virus, either computer or corona.

While a computer virus can bring a great deal of aggravation and headache, a biological virus can bring very real physical affliction and even death.

Granted, the actual “numbers” for the current coronavirus with respect to death rates are relatively low - to date about 0.04% for the US population or .024% for the Virginia population - that really doesn’t matter if one of the people making up those relatively low percentages happens to be one of your “relatives.”

Part of the efforts to contain the spread of the virus and minimize those percentages is to identify the source of the possible contagion. A process that is not always easy or straightforward.

In the 5th chapter of Romans the Apostle Paul speaks of another type of “virus” - the virus of sin. A virus with both an infection rate as well as death rate of 100%. But, in this instance, we can easily track the source:

“...just as sin entered the world through one man,”

A study of the scriptures reveals that Paul is referring to Adam as that “*one man*.” Adam was “patient zero” and his disobedience, his sin in the garden brought the pandemic of sin to all mankind. As a result;

“in this way death came to all people,”

The result of that pandemic was certain death. At the point of disobedience spiritual death, separation from God, occurred.

Adam and Eve, and all mankind that followed tested positive for the virus - the sin virus - and the result was death. Initially it was spiritual death, eventually physical death.

We have been hearing on the news of the massive concerted efforts being made to develop a vaccine for the coronavirus, the ultimate goal of which is to save lives. I even heard one drug company CEO state that as they hope to have a vaccine available in the near future; “we are not in it for profit, but will make it available to the entire world.” (I guess we’ll see about that...)

But the “vaccine,” the cure, the remedy for the sin virus *has* been made available to the world:

“For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:19)

“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2)

The “He” in that verse is Jesus Christ, who:

“humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8)

Through His sacrificial death on the cross we can be “vaccinated” against the curse of certain death - spiritual death.

Hopefully one day very soon a vaccine for the coronavirus will be available. But the benefits of that vaccine will not be automatic.

There are many who are already voicing their skepticism about receiving a vaccine that they are “unsure of,” and certainly that is a personal choice.

Likewise the life-giving benefit of the righteous redemption from sin and death offered in and through Jesus Christ is available... but not automatic. It must be received by grace through faith - a personal choice.

As we continue to wait for that coronavirus vaccine, and see the death toll continue to rise from COVID-19, that number nevertheless pales in comparison to those who are dying everyday not having received the “vaccine” of salvation so readily available in Christ.

May we who have been “innoculated” with grace share this truth:

“... just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 5:21)

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Warfare Prayer

Ephesians 6:18

“Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.”

My dad was a member of the United States Army Reserve from the age of 18 until he retired as a Colonel after 34 years of military service. For a number of years he served as an instructor at the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk.

While I was in high school, one of his “students” was, ironically, my principal. I can remember on a couple of occasions being “summoned” to the office (complete with all of the anxiety that produces) only to be told; “I need you to deliver this to Colonel Bunch.”

I went from feeling like the guy who had been apprehended for skipping school to go surfing, to an international intelligence agent delivering top secret sensitive documents. (More likely it was just some homework assignment, but I never dared “break the seal.”)

Completion of courses at the Armed Forces Staff College was a requirement for application to attend the United States Army Warfare College, which was founded 1901 to train strategic leaders in the use of military assets to defend the United States. The stated purpose of the USAWC is: “Not to promote war, but to preserve peace by intelligent and adequate preparation to repeal aggression.”

The theme of the 6th chapter of Ephesians is often referred to as “Putting on the Whole Armor of God.”

In verse 11 the Apostle Paul encourages believers to;

“Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. .”

And then the familiar passage, verses 14-17:

“Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

And for some reason we kind of mentally pause there at the end of verse 17 and do our check-list:

Belt of Truth - check
Breastplate of Righteousness - check
Feet fitted with Readiness - check
Shield of Faith - check
Helmet of Salvation - check
Sword of the Spirit - check

But one of the most powerful, we might even say military, assets in the arsenal of the believer is found in verse 18:

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”

Last week I shared a devotional on the Power of Praise, and when you think about it, praise is really a form of “praying in the Spirit.”

We saw in 2 Chronicles chapter 20 how God came through for the Hebrew children with supernatural deliverance.
We could use some of that today!

The Church is not an army per se, but we have been called to defend against an enemy aggressor. With all of the unrest and strife we are seeing in our country today we don't have to look very far to see who is ultimately behind that division.

And please understand that I am not referring to this or that political party or social movement. His Word is clear:

"For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace..."
(1 Corinthians 14:33)

"For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work."
(James 3:16)

So, if the unrest, strife, confusion... is NOT coming from God... We have to realize that it is ultimately coming from the enemy aggressor, our ancient spiritual foe. The evil one who seeks to deceive and divide.

Part of the stated purpose of the United States Army Warfare College is: "...adequate preparation to repeal aggression."

How adequately prepared are we? If the graduates of the USAWC were to evaluate and examine our defensive strategies to repeal Satan's aggression what would they conclude? Are we fully utilizing our most strategic weapon - prayer?

One person put it this way: "If you are a Christian, you are a spiritual soldier - and planned prayer is your most strategic weapon."

As we continue to adapt and move forward over the next weeks and months we are actively planning ways in which we can more effectively utilize strategic prayer. We hope to be able to open up our church facilities at designated times to provide a place where individuals and families can pray with purpose - and a plan.

David Jeremiah has said: "Strategic warfare prayer needs a place, a purpose, a plan - but most of all, a pray-er."

May we all be that "pray-er" as we;

"Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere."

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Tamper-Proof Guaranteed

2 Corinthians 1:21-22

There are a number of products on the market that make claims of being tamper proof. Things like tamper-proof screws and bolts, hinges, outlets and packaging. The term tamper-proof simply means ***being made so that it cannot be interfered with or changed***. There are companies who make ice chest that claim their coolers are bear proof. I certainly don't want to be that close to a bear to find out if my cooler is one that can't be eaten! Medicine bottles now come with tamper-proof caps that are supposed to keep children from getting into your medication. Trust me, I have met some kids who I am sure could get into bear proof coolers! So tamper-proof caps are no challenge for some of our little ones.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22 (NIV) ... "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, [22] set his **seal of ownership** on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

Notice here that Paul writes of God's seal of ownership. To seal something in Paul's day had specific meaning. There were two meanings in particular suggested here that would have been understood by anyone living in Paul's day during the time of the Roman Empire. First of all, whenever the government put its seal on anything, to tamper with it was considered as an attack on the government itself. If you remember, the Jews wanted the Romans to put a seal on the tomb of Jesus to guarantee that His followers would not dare tamper with it and steal Jesus' body. Second, a government seal was also a guarantee that the sealed container held exactly what was claimed to be inside.

Now consider what Paul was trying to teach us in regard to our

relationship with God. First, because we now belong to God and have been sealed by Him with the Holy Spirit, we are so secure that we are literally and spiritually tamper-proof. To tamper with a believer then would mean that you are taking on all the powers of heaven. In other words, you would be messing with Almighty God! Not a good idea. So God has us covered and sealed for all eternity as belonging to Him!

Now here is an even grander thought if you can imagine there could be one. Over and over in Scripture, God tells us that as a child of God we are forgiven, saved, loved, blessed, gifted, and that we are guaranteed an eternal home with Him in the heavens. Have you ever had a day when you didn't feel like any of God's promises were meant for you? We all have but that doesn't change the truth! Think about it, God's seal on our soul guarantees that He lives inside of me in the Person of the Holy Spirit. The promise and the presence of the Holy Spirit in me and you is a guarantee that should bring all believers great comfort and assurance! Praise God we are sealed for all eternity and nothing can ever break or remove His seal!

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***Father, thank you that you Word tells me that I am sealed until the day of Redemption and nothing will ever be able to separate me from the love of Christ Jesus. You have place on me a seal of protection that cannot be tampered with in anyway!***  
***Thank You Lord!***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# A history of mirrors

*James 1:23-25*

A history of mirrors?

Yay.

Bear with me. Mirrors have been around for a long time. Of course I won't bore you with the complete history, but some history of mirrors can be useful. I bet you look in the mirror more than you realize. Granted, for most people as they are getting ready to go somewhere they spend some time looking in the mirror. They fix their hair, shave, put on make-up, brush their teeth, check that their clothes sit right and that everything goes together before they leave the house.

But during the day we do spot-checks. When we use the restroom, we wash our hands and take a quick look in the mirror to make sure we're still put together. If we see something is out of whack we adjust it and move on. Now we use phones like mirrors sometimes.

Like I said, mirrors have been around for a long time and we use them probably more than we realize. Mirrors have been around since the 3rd century BCE. Most ancient mirrors were round metal plates, polished smooth on one side and embellished with ornamentation on the other side. The first glass mirrors were invented in the first century by the Romans. That's right, it's possible

that the apostle Paul actually saw his own reflection in a glass mirror.

In medieval times they stopped using glass mirrors because the belief spread that the devil was watching from behind the glass. In the 13th century, however, glass mirrors made a return as the technique for attaching tin to glass improved, allowing for a flat, smooth image instead of a warped one. In 1373 the first mirror manufacturing plant was built in Nuremberg, Germany.

Venetian mirrors, however, were such a thing of pride and beauty that those who made the mirrors were brought to the island of Murano, and when people asked what they did for a living, they said they were firefighters, like spies with a fabricated identity. We'll come back to this.

Even James talks about mirrors in Scripture:

**James 1:23-25--** *Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it--not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it--they will be blessed in what they do.*

James equates the perfect law to a mirror. He tells us that if we read the law for life change, but we don't do what it says to do, we are like someone who looks in a mirror, notices a problem, but ignores it. The question is, why did that person look in a mirror in the first place?

Let's be honest, for most of us, looking in the mirror brings a strong reaction sometimes. For some they like to spend more time in front of the mirror because they enjoy their beauty. Their physical appearance is a point of pride. They sometimes feel that the world needs to applaud their attractiveness so they post a stream of selfies daily on their social media accounts.

Others have a strong negative reaction, renegotiating every perceived flaw, wishing it away, pining for improvement. Sometimes they are motivated to work to change it, sometimes they do not move to change but only to dream, sometimes they merely acknowledge it but see it as unchangeable.

James is speaking of the law of God, which is given to bring about change. When we see the reality of who we are against the standard of the law, we will be wise to begin (or continue) the steps of change. In a mirror if we see that we have an imperfection or some adjustment needs to be made, we can sometimes fix it quickly; sometimes we will make a plan to adjust our lives to change the imperfection. For instance, if we see we have put on some weight, we may decide we need to cut something out of our diet and to be more active.

A mirror is a great tool for us to have a true image of who we are. Even with a perfect mirror, our perception may be off, which is why we need to learn to be honest about who we are and how we see ourselves. A perfect mirror displays reality. That's why James compares the mirror to the perfect law of God. If we look into the perfect law (a perfect mirror) we will be shown the reality of ourselves.

We can work with that and make the decisions we need to make to bring about change

Often, however, we prefer a Venetian mirror. Venetian mirrors were very popular in the 1500s. The masters there had invented a second trick in addition to the flat mirror. They added gold and bronze to the mixture so that the reflections had some added beauty; not a lot, just enough. The cost of a Venetian mirror at that time could cost as much as a naval ship.

Many of us would prefer a Venetian mirror to show us a better version of ourselves, but the World tells us the perfect law is a perfect mirror. We may want to feel better about ourselves than the law actually reflects, but James tells us that when we learn and change based on what we see in the law, we will be blessed in what we do.

We all have our own history with mirrors. Not all pleasant. But this is one mirror that is perfect and reflects reality. What a blessing to see the reflection and be changed.

*Lord, thank you for the mirror of your word. Thank you that rather than comforting me with lies you show me the truth. Even when the reflection is unappealing I need to see the reality of who I am. I know you see in me not just who I am, but who I will be. Help me to become all that you have made me to be through reflecting on your word. In Jesus Name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# But for the grace

*Titus 3:3-7*

"Cancel culture" is real. If you've never heard the term or if you have heard the term but don't really know what it means, cancel culture means that people are being fired, their social media accounts shut down, their endorsements pulled, or their lives in some other way drastically impacted because someone is unhappy with them.

This week, a young woman apologized for a social media post she made several years ago where she imitated an Asian accent. Her name is Maddie Ziegler and she's been a backup dancer for a while, but started out as one of the students on *Dance Moms*.

She is seventeen.

She made the video when she was nine.

There's obviously much we can discuss about children and teens and social media, but that's not the point of this devotion. The point is, she was nine when she posted, is only seventeen now, and anything anyone has ever done apparently means their whole lives can be ruined because someone complains about it.

We are seeing corporations changing their entire structure, changing their names, getting new logos or mascots, and forgetting their purpose as a corporation

for the sake of making sure potential customers don't even have the opportunity of being offended by their product.

**Titus 3:3-7**-- *At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

The world is woefully short on compassion. We all have the opportunity to be offended by anyone at any time, but we don't have to be. That's a choice we make.

One of the easiest ways to garner compassion for others is to look back at our own lives. We can ask ourselves, "Have I ever done anything mean or insensitive to anyone at any time?"

If you answer anything other than "yes" you're not looking hard enough.

Paul was writing to Titus about what he needs to do to shepherd the local body as Paul is trying to build the Church somewhere else. In verse 2 he says to remind the people to be peaceable and considerate, gentle to everyone (because...)

On July 15, 1555, John Bradford was burned at the stake. He was 45 years old. He was executed by Queen Mary (known as Bloody Mary) for preaching the true gospel of Jesus Christ, which shone a light on the fact that the nation of England had forsaken God. He was not the first to be executed and in fact it was as he watched some being led to their own execution for the faith, that he said, "There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford." Because it was in reference to himself, others began to utter it in its now famous form, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Our own attitude toward others' faults, failings, and yes, even their sin, ought to be a reflection of what God has done for us. We are not better people than those around us. We have only surrendered to the grace God so freely offers us.

One of the reasons, frankly, that the world is where it is, is because the Church has failed to do what we have been called to do. We have not preached the gospel faithfully. We have not clung to the faith. We have not removed heretics from positions of authority. We have not prayed for our leaders. In short, we have been weak and quiet, judgmental and angry, faithless and disobedient.

Is it any wonder the world is where it is?

Let us not work so hard to cancel those who have erred in the past as if it is something fresh and new. Rather, let us work to cancel our OWN sin, bowing to the throne of God and receiving the grace of God by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Only then can we begin to offer true compassion to others and realize,

"There but for the grace of God go I."

*Thank you, Lord, that you have provided not just salvation, but compassion. Thank you that you show me who I am not just so I can repent, but so I can show compassion to others. Give me the eyes to see others the way you do and the courage to speak the truth in love. In Jesus' name, amen.*

***Pastor Art Stafford***



## I'm Hungry!

Matthew 5:6

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."*

I'm hungry...

What's for supper...?

How long before we eat...?

What parent hasn't heard some version of one of these statements at some time or the other. Or who among us has not been guilty of complaining that *we* are the ones who are hungry, even going so far as to say; "What's for dinner? I'm *starving*."

The truth be known, the vast majority of us have probably never experienced true, "*starving*" hunger.

Even during this time of pandemic, when the store shelves and meat freezers may not be as completely stocked, or we may not be able to freely go to our favorite restaurant, we all still seem to be getting plenty to eat. In fact, many folks are bemoaning the "pandemic pounds" they seem to have put on.

I came across this verse from the Gospel of Matthew in one of my devotionals last week, and the writer presented these interesting facts by way of introduction:

"It is said that a human can live three minutes without oxygen, three days without water, and three weeks without food."

I certainly don't want to test the validity of these facts! Most of us have a hard time making it three *hours* without getting hungry, much less going three weeks without eating.

But what about spiritual starvation? How long can we survive spiritually and emotionally without divine spiritual nourishment? For that matter, how long can we go without spiritual nourishment before we even get hungry for it?

Generally speaking, with physical hunger the longer you are without food, the hungrier you get. And it is usually not a pretty sight. We've probably all heard of people who get "hangry" - when they get hungry, they get angry.

But ironically for many it seems the longer they go without seeking spiritual nourishment, the easier it gets to just ignore. The daily Bible reading becomes weekly, then every now and then, until finally it is;

"Hey, has anybody seen my Bible? I know I left it here somewhere... oh well..."

One of the things about the current pandemic situation that concerns many pastors is that unfortunately a number of people have simply gotten "used to" just not going to church. Study after study shows that once an individual gets "used to" not attending worship weekly, or even monthly, the easier it becomes for them to not attend at all. Instead of getting more intense, their spiritual hunger actually wanes.

In this passage from the Beatitudes Jesus promises that  
*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”*

Just what does it mean to *“hunger and thirst for righteousness?”*

The definition of the Greek word translated as *“righteousness”* is: “ the act of doing what is in agreement with God's standards, the state of being in proper relationship with God.”

A proper relationship with God made possible through believing in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Or as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8;

*“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”*

And the writer of Hebrews states;

*“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

To *“earnestly seek him”* in, with, and through faith is to hunger and thirst for righteousness - to be in agreement and proper relationship with God and His standards.

That type of spiritual nourishment is not going to happen apart from His Word. But it is also not likely to happen without gathering together with other believers in worship, prayer and study. (Even if for some it has to be “virtual” for the time being.)

The beauty of Jesus’ promise is that if you come to His table hungry for His righteousness, you will be both *“blessed”* and *“filled.”*

*-Pastor Ronnie Bunch*

# Indeed at work

1 Thess 2:13

Now that our daughter is 18 and is legally an adult, all the legal documents she has to sign don't require my signature beneath them. As she has been signing up for college classes, applying for jobs and pursuing financial aid and scholarships, she has been able to sign her own name without me signing on. She even called in and picked up her own medicine once without asking me to do it for her.

Why is she allowed to do this? Because she is recognized as her own authority. The full brunt of the consequences of her choices will come back to her, not to me. In fact I have told parents and students this on occasion: "All turning eighteen means is that when you get busted the cops come after you, not your parents."

That's a sobering thought.

One more thing, however, is that for her job application she had to get a criminal background check that required a notary. She came to the church to sign her form and get it notarized before submitting it.

A notary allows an agency, government or otherwise, to recognize the authenticity of a signature. A notary is certified to say that they personally witnessed the signing of the document by the person who was supposed to sign it. It's fraud prevention.

**1 Thess 2:13--** *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*

Paul was excited that the Thessalonians received the word of God as the word of God. In other words, they trusted that what Paul and his companions taught them was a truth from God, not some story made up or embellished by Paul and his friends.

The earliest documented use of the word *charlatan* was 1607. Some believe the word *charlatan* is a mix of two origins, both Italian. First, it could be taken from the word *ciarlare*, which means "to chatter," since charlatans are big talkers, jabbering on about nothing. The other origin is believed to be from the word *ciarlatano*, from *cerretano* (an inhabitant of Cerreto). Cerreto is a village in Umbria, Italy, once known for its quacks.

Now we think of charlatans as scam artists or, to put it another way, snake oil salesmen. Scam artists are craftsmen, often very intelligent, finding ways to take advantage of those who are trusting or are desperate for help in a seemingly helpless situation. We get calls from them telling us our computer has been compromised but they can fix it, or how to make quick easy money, lose weight fast, or clear our bodies of toxins.

But they are also in the religious field, too. We are warned many times through the gospels and the epistles,

to keep an eye out for false teachers and prophets. We are reminded to watch out for ourselves and to protect others from them.

Authenticity is important in many areas, not the least of which is the faith. This is why it is important to get to know the word of God. To read it, to study it, to pray and ask God to change us through the washing of the water of the Word.

Paul's evidence that the Thessalonians received the word of God was that it was "indeed at work" in those who believed. If the word is not at work in us, it is probably one of two things:

1. It's not really the word of God. It is religious superstition.
2. It really is the word of God, but we have not actually "received" it.

What does it mean to "receive" it? To use a football analogy, a pass isn't complete because the receiver touches the football. It is not a completed pass until it has been received, which means grasped, taken possession of and secured. He can touch it, bobble it in his hands as he runs and eventually drop it, and it will be an incomplete pass.

In the same way, "receiving the word of God" means grasping it, taking possession of it, and securing it in our hearts. At that point it will indeed be at work in us.

*Thank you, Lord, for your word. Thank you that you have given it to us and that those who have gone before have received it and passed it on to us. I know there are things in me that make it hard for me to receive everything in your word. Show me what they are and how to overcome them so that I can receive, possess and secure your word in my heart and be changed. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Pray! ... Pray! ... Pray!

Matthew 7:7-11

I confess that I don't pray enough. No one does. But I do want a stronger and more effective prayer life. The more I study, the more I understand that my prayers and the activity of the Holy Spirit in my life are essential! They are connected and very important!

God calls us to be people of prayer.

**Matthew 7:7-11 (NLT) ... “Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened. [8] For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks. [9] You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? [10] Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! [11] If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.”**

Jesus instructs us to Ask ... Seek ... Knock!

In other words, we are to be persistent in praying! Paul tells us to pray without ceasing. God wants us to speak with Him throughout our day sharing with Him our concerns and needs. Honestly, prayer itself seems to be a bit of a mystery. Think about it ... why should we tell God something that He already knows about? He does know everything! And just what does prayer really do? Can our prayers in any way alter the plans of God? He already has a master plan on the books.

Obviously prayer is very important! Just think about all the times in the Bible where we see Jesus praying. It was a major part of his life. He spent so much time alone with the Father in prayer. Not only did Jesus practice prayer, but He implored us to pray. Study the discipline of prayer and it becomes clear that there are things in our lives that God will not do unless we pray. Dr. William Rice has written that ***prayer is part of God's working in us to bring us to a place of humility and dependence on Him.***

Just think about what you are struggling with today. How long do you intend to struggle? What do you need God to help you with? Have you made any effort to have a conversation with God about your concerns? Jesus clearly tells us that we need to talk with the Father.

**Dr. William Rice ... *God is not some cosmic genie who bends His will toward ours to meet our selfish desires. But during prayer God bends our wills toward His. During prayer God conforms our hearts to see His will. God accomplishes this sanctifying work when we humble ourselves, acknowledge our dependency on Him, and pray.***

Friends, you and I need to pray more! Prayer needs to become a holy habit! If we would just spend one tenth of the time we talk on the phone talking to God in prayer, it would spiritually transform our lives. Think about what it would do for our families, our church, and our nation?

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***Father, please forgive me for my silence and prideful sense of self-sufficiency. Thank You for being willing to listen to me. Teach me and help me to go to You in prayer first and often.  
Thank You for the precious gift of prayer!***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# It's Simple Math!

Matthew 28:18-20

**John 14:2 (NCV) ... “There are many rooms in my Father's house; I would not tell you this if it were not true. I am going there to prepare a place for you.”**

If I understand Jesus correctly, God has a really big home in heaven with more than enough room for anyone who wants to live there. God is expecting a really big family to move in and stay for all eternity. As Christians, you and I have two responsibilities: ... first, we need to be ready to move in our new home and the second responsibility is to help others make it into heaven as well. God wants a full house? How's that going to happen?

**Matthew 28:18-20 (NLT) ... “Jesus came and told his disciples, ‘I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth. [19] Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. [20] Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”**

Four times in the gospels and once in the Book of Acts, Jesus tells us ... the Church ... that we are to go and make disciples of all nations. That is the purist definition of evangelism. Our greatest task is to help fill up God's house! Remember it is a big house and so filling it up is a big task! It's a really big math problem. But the question is what form of math works best? Subtraction, division, addition, or multiplication?

Rocky Purvis suggest we consider two options: ... which one of these choices would you want? You can either take \$10,000 each day for 30 days ... or you can take \$1 on day one and have it doubled for 30 days.

Which one would you choose? If you chose option 1 you would get \$300,000. That's a lot of money! But if you chose option 2, you would receive \$536,870,912! Option 1 is good, but obviously option 2 is a whole lot better! Well, what is true with money is equally true with filling up God's house.

If God's house is going to have all the rooms occupied, the you and I have to be disciple makers. A disciple maker is a soul winner. Jesus does the saving, but He wants us to tell His story.

**Romans 10:13-15 (NLT) ... “For ‘Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ [14] But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? [15] And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is what the Scriptures mean when they say, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”**

Not only has Jesus called you to be a disciple maker, but He has commanded us to make disciples who then make more disciples. That my friend is multiplication! That's how God's house gets full! If every one of us would make it our life goal to win just one souls and then disciple them to reach another lost soul ... God's house sure would fill up fast! ... So why isn't that a priority for us?

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***Father, burden my heart for someone who is lost
and don't let me rest until they have accepted Christ
and then sharing their faith with others.
Please help me take disciple making serious!***

Pastor Randy Green

No offense

2 Corinthians 6:3

Lately I've been noticing a growing trend: Christians are idiots.

That didn't come out right. What I mean is, there's a growing trend in the media, in academia, and in entertainment, that those who claim to be Christians are portrayed as morons. We are seen as gullible, uneducated and spiteful. Or we are seen as generally terrible people who carry a Bible to beat people with.

There are a lot of adjectives people use to describe Christians, but loving generally isn't one of them.

As a believer, on the one hand I understand it and on the other hand it doesn't line up with my experience. Being in the church as much as I am, I have known a lot of very caring, sympathetic people; a lot of smart, rational people; a lot of highly-educated people who are successful in business and respected in the community.

There's not a pattern for who a Christian is or what one looks like. There's not even a pattern for how a Christian thinks. God brings all kinds of people to himself and they don't necessarily give up their personalities as a result. Sure, he cleans us up, but he doesn't make us less funny, less intelligent, less sensitive, or whatever else makes up a key part of our personalities.

What he does do is takes who he created us to be and shapes us into his image. Our talents become refined for his purposes if we partner with him to make that happen.

One example is Kanye West. I don't know what Kanye knows or what he believes exactly, but it appears that over the last couple of years he has been redeemed and focused on taking his talents and his popularity and trying to point people to Christ. Justin Bieber has likewise taken a turn to practice his faith in a more practical way, even having a pastor to mentor him as he tries to make wise decisions.

I'm not endorsing either of them personally, but from what I've seen they seem to be sincere, given the sacrifices they have had to make to practice their faith.

2 Cor. 6:3-- *We are not giving anyone an occasion for offense, so that the ministry will not be blamed.*

Paul, here, is speaking of the necessity of living with integrity so that the ministry of Christ doesn't look bad. David Guzik says, "Paul was not afraid to offend anyone over the gospel of Jesus Christ, but he would not allow his style of ministry to offend anyone."

He knew that the gospel was offensive to those who are perishing, but he did not want to offend people by the way he ministered. He didn't want to give people the occasion to be offended because of corruption. While false accusations cannot be completely avoided, we

need to live with integrity so that people don't have anything honestly to hold against us in the way we represent Christ.

As we continue to be set free from our old way of thinking and living, it can be a struggle not to react in our old way when times get tough. In 2 Cor 6 Paul continues on to list ways in which they struggle, but that they made it a point to live in integrity.

As we move further and further into what has been called the "Post-Christian Era" two things will happen: Christianity will be belittled and its ideas and values mocked, and the Kingdom will grow. It always grows more strongly under persecution and stress. What will make the difference for many people will be the way Christians respond. Will we be seen as corrupt or will we be seen as faithful followers to the teachings of Christ?

Thank you, Lord, that you have provided not just a new way to think, but a new heart that makes it possible. Give me a heart to follow you in all things and to live a life of integrity. Help me to be a good ambassador for the kingdom, speaking the offensive truth of the gospel without being offensive in the way I follow you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Right on time

John 11

John 11:1-43, almost the entire chapter, is about Jesus' response to Lazarus' sickness and death. Lazarus was a good friend of Jesus and was the brother of Mary and Martha. Yes, THAT Mary and Martha, the sisters that argued about priorities (John 12), came after Jesus had raised their brother from the dead.

It was Jesus' response to the news of Lazarus' illness that confused (and still confuses) a lot of people. He said, "This sickness will not end in death; it is for God's glory so that God's son may be glorified" (11:4). Then he stayed two more days before heading to Judea.

He then told the disciples that Lazarus had fallen asleep, but he was going to go wake him up. "Good," they said. "If he rests, he'll get better."

"I mean he's dead. And you know what? I'm glad I wasn't there. This way you will believe."

After Jesus spoke with Martha and then Mary, he asked to see where Lazarus had been buried. They took him to the tomb and he wept. He told them to move the stone and they objected. "It's been four days," they said, "and it's gonna stink something awful."

"Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" he asked. Then he prayed, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know you always

hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe you sent me."

He then called, "Lazarus, come out!"

Lazarus, looking like a mummy, came out of the tomb. Jesus said, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

John 11:14-15-- *So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."*

Jesus' rationale for waiting doesn't line up with our expectations a lot of the time. The disciples had seen Jesus heal, they had seen him teach, walk on water and multiply food. But they had never seen the true power he had over death.

If he had gone to Lazarus when he was sick they would have seen yet another healing. While all miraculous healing was/is amazing and shows that Jesus is praise-worthy, it still would have been something they already knew Jesus could do.

Jesus knew they needed to see more in order to trust him more. So he waited.

One of the things that happened by Jesus waiting was that the suffering and grief grew, it deepened. Alexander McLaren says, "Sorrow is prolonged for the same reason as it was sent. It is of little use to send it for a little while."

When sorrow is delayed and it grows, it prompts a deeper dependence on God, a longing for the only one who can resolve our sorrow, knowing we cannot do it on our own or rush through it just to be done already.

But another thing was an understanding of the time. By waiting until Lazarus had been dead for four days, he showed absolute power over death. Rabbi Ben Kaphra says, "For three days the spirit hovers about the tomb, if perchance it may return to the body. But, when it sees the fashion of the countenance changed, it retires and abandons the body."

According to Jewish understanding of the time, the spirit doesn't fully abandon the body for three days, in hope that it can return. Yes, Lazarus was fully dead, and whether the spirit hangs around may be nothing more than Jewish tradition, but by Jesus waiting four days he showed that he had absolute power over death and the spiritual realm. He was truly the Son of God with all authority!

If he truly has all authority, what do you have that you cannot trust him with? What causes you grief and sorrow that you do not think Jesus is powerful enough to manage?

We may think that God shows up late to our crisis, but God is never late. He shows up when he is supposed to show up. He works in the way he intends to work. He waits or heals or raises the dead or provides for our bills or fills our fridge or mends our relationships just when it is needed. Sometimes that's later than we prefer.

But it's never too late.

Thank you, Lord, for showing up right on time. Even when I think you should be here earlier, I know that most of the time that would just be you waiting on me. I know I need to be ready to watch you work, so sometimes I'm the one that shows up late. Help me to trust you more so that I can trust you WITH more. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Secure

Proverbs 1:33

“But whoever listens to me will dwell safely, and will be secure, without fear of evil.”

Insecure...

Pretty much the way a lot of folks feel about a lot of things these days.

Whether we are talking about the virus, the civil unrest, the economy, world events or the general breakdown of traditional cultural norms, there seems to be plenty of things to make us feel insecure. We sometimes wonder - is it even possible to feel any sense of security, for the present or the future, in the world as we know it today?

It was exciting to join together in “real live” Adult Bible Study once again this past Sunday. We are beginning our study in the Book of Proverbs and according to King Solomon the answer to that question is; Yes, we can know and experience security in the times in which we live.

As we look at the Book of Proverbs we see that the first nine chapters are presented as words of advice and instruction from a father to his immature son. The teachings are given to help the young man (or woman) grow in understanding and wisdom.

In the last half of chapter 1, Wisdom is personified, and given her own voice to warn and instruct.

*“Out in the open wisdom calls aloud,
she raises her voice in the public square;
on top of the wall she cries out,
at the city gate she makes her speech.”*
(Proverbs 1:20-21)

There seems to be an awful lot of voices that are rising “in the public square” of social media and the airwaves of the news outlets these days. But it might be a bit of stretch to call most of what is “out there” - wisdom.

With all of the negativity that is “out there,” for many it can be very easy to become discouraged and in fact feel insecure about their safety and their future. You don’t have to look far to find the latest “doom and gloom” reports and predictions about whatever topic seems to be currently in vogue.

In Proverbs 1 the instruction given to the foolish young men of the day warns against rejecting the voice and outstretched hand of wisdom;

*“But since you refuse to listen when I call
and no one pays attention when I stretch out my hand,”*
(Proverbs 1:24)

This rejection results in a hatred for knowledge of the truth, a prerequisite for wisdom;

*“...since they hated knowledge
and did not choose to fear the Lord.”*
(Proverbs 1:29)

The passage goes on to present the sobering fact that even as they ignored wisdom in their rejection and rebellion, wisdom will ignore them in their day of trouble.

But the chapter closes with a wonderful truth and promise; for those who do listen to the voice of wisdom and heed her instruction, it is possible to live in safety and security.

A security that comes from not only listening to, but also obeying the wisdom of God as we walk in His ways.

“But whoever listens to me will dwell safely, and will be secure, without fear of evil.”

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Stay Salty

Matthew 5:13

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

Most everyone who knows me, also knows that even at (almost) 62 years of age I still like to surf. In fact most of those same folks would contend that phrasing it that way; “I *like* to surf,” is a bit of an understatement. OK, I *really* like to surf. I love to get in the ocean - the salt water.

Quite honestly, I am not now, nor have I ever been an exceptionally good surfer, but I still like to get and “stay salty” as often as time and favorable ocean swells allow. I tell people my surfing is about like my golf game... it might not be pretty, but I’m still having a good time.

In this passage from the “Sermon on the Mount” in the fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus is speaking to his disciples and the crowds that had gathered to hear him teach. After sharing “the Beatitudes” he then makes this statement;

“You are the salt of the earth.”

Jesus’ hearers may not have fully understood the significance of the statement at that time, but they would have certainly understood the worth and value of salt in first century Palestine. During the early days of the Roman Empire, salt was used as a form of payment.

Being so valuable, soldiers in the Roman army were sometimes paid with salt instead of money. Their monthly allowance was called “salarium” (“sal” being the Latin word for salt). This Latin root can be recognized in the French word “salaire” — and it eventually made it into the English language as the word “salary.”

But the reason it was so valuable was because of its many useful properties. It was not only used to season food, but also to preserve it. It was used medicinally as a disinfectant. The Greek physician Hippocrates encouraged his fellow healers to use salt water to heal various ailments by immersing their patients in sea water. (See... I’ve always said that getting in the ocean is a cure for everything - get salty!)

As followers of Jesus we *are* the salt of the earth, and should exhibit the properties of salt.

Salt seasons, it gives flavor and zest to life. As you love and follow Jesus - his flavor, his zest should come out in and through you such that others can see the difference he has made in your life.

Salt can preserve and heal. As you allow others to see that difference Christ has made in your life, and you are: “...prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have....”

(1 Peter 3:15)

you can point them to source of healing and salvation - the ultimate preservation!

Salt also makes one thirsty. Is the example of your life testimony making people thirsty for God? Do they desire to “have what you have” - the Living Water?

But salt also irritates. We've all heard the phrase: *"like pouring salt in a wound."*

In this day and time especially, just by being a Christian you are going to irritate some people. Not that you'll do it on purpose, (hopefully,) but often unbelievers just don't want to hear the "salty" truth because it does irritate. It convicts.

Jesus goes on to say;

"But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."

In Jesus' time much of the salt was obtained from the Dead (Salt) Sea. But this salt was not pure sodium chloride. If not used properly this salt, which contained other chemical impurities, could in fact *"lose it's saltiness,"* at which point it would be thrown on the ground to keep weeds off of a pathway. Literally *"trampled underfoot."*

For the believer, Jesus has proclaimed that we *are* the salt of the earth. As such we have been given the responsibility to first recognize our value, but then to model the properties of salt: to add flavor and zest to life, to preserve, to heal and even to irritate.

The question is... are we going to "Stay Salty?"

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

The Follow-up

John 5:14

Follow-up can be an important part of talking to people, especially in things like medicine, sales, technology and ministry.

When you set up an appointment with your doctor for a new health concern or a new prescription, they will schedule a follow-up. Sometimes the follow-up only lasts a minute, but they ask, "Are you using the medicine as prescribed?"

Sometimes we are prescribed a medicine that friends or family will say, "I wouldn't take that. I read on the internet that..." Or they personally had a bad experience with that medicine or with that doctor. Or sometimes they just knew a guy who knew a guy. So what do we do? We use our best judgment.

A lot has been missed by poor or no follow-up. Sometimes it's because the follow-up was never done. Sometimes it's because the follow-up was done, but the instructions weren't followed. Sometimes it's because follow-up was done but the patient or client is not honest about if/how they are using the product, taking the meds, or changing to fit the advice given.

We didn't usually see Jesus in a follow-up with someone he healed. Maybe he saw that the moment someone was healed and open was the time to plant insight and

correction into their heart. There would be no better time to offer that correction than when someone was wide open to hear it. Usually we didn't see or hear from that person again. A couple of times we did.

The leper who returned to give thanks is one.

And then there's the man who was healed at the Pool of Bethesda. Read John 5:1-16 for the story. Long story short, a man who had been disabled for 38 years was on his mat waiting for the water to be stirred by the angel. Once the water was stirred, the first one in would be healed and everyone else would have to try again.

Naturally, the man lying on his mat would not be able to beat everyone to the pool so he had not been healed by the waters. Jesus asked him if he wanted to get healed, he explained his dilemma and Jesus said, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." He did.

Oops. Jesus healed on the Sabbath. So the man was carrying his mat on the Sabbath. This was against Jewish law, so they called him on it. He said the guy who healed him told him to stand up, pick up his mat and walk, but he didn't know who he was.

John 5:14-- *Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."*

The man went and told the Jews it was Jesus who healed him, so the Jewish leaders began to persecute

Jesus because he healed on the Sabbath. You can read more about Jesus' response to them in John 5.

I want to talk about Jesus' follow-up because it's rare to read about it. In this case, Jesus was in the temple. He ran into the man he healed and he took advantage of their time to finish his instruction. His instructions were simple: "Stop sinning."

That sounds familiar. "Go and sin no more" is the instruction he gave to another person he encountered (John 8). Paul tells the church in Corinth to come back to their senses and stop sinning (1 Cor. 15:34). Peter tells his readers that false prophets "never stop sinning" (2 Pet. 2:14).

It's interesting how simple Jesus' instructions are to those he heals or rescues. "Stop sinning." I say simple, because I mean it isn't complex. Simple and easy aren't the same thing. Easy means it can be accomplished without much effort. Ceasing to sin is not easy; some say it's not even possible. At that point the discussion turns to the reality that if it IS possible, it still requires absolute trust and obedience to Christ for it to be possible.

For the record, according to 1 John 1:8-9, it is not possible to stop sinning completely. John tells us, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

We will never be completely free from sinning. Paul tells us in Romans 7 of his own internal wrestling match. It is common to all of us.

Then why would Jesus say it? Because we need to know what is required. We cannot say we are followers of Christ, children of God, if we point to our baptism and say, "See? Follower of Christ." No, we are to partner with Christ every day to kick against our sinful nature, the temptations of the day, our draw to that which we used to do after being set free from the shackles.

When is the last time you had a follow-up with Jesus?

Jesus: "How's it going lately?"

Me: "Not great. I've been stumbling around a lot."

Jesus: "Tell me about it."

I confess my sin and Jesus forgives me. He says, "Let's take a look at how to get rid of that."

Thank you, Lord for providing a way out of my sin. Thank you that when I sin, your forgiveness is just a confession away. Thank you that you are faithful to me, even when I am unfaithful to you. Help me to humble myself so that I can be honest with you and receive your grace so I can break free from the sins I return to. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

The Goats

Acts 26:14

Let me introduce you to Maggie. Maggie was the dog Heather and I adopted not long after we got married. She was about sixty pounds, a mixed breed of Shar-Pei and Rhodesian Ridgeback. She was fun and gentle, liked to play rough with me, even climbing onto me as we wrestled and biting my neck and shoulder. When she was excited, her long, pointed tail could bruise your leg.

But she was also mischievous. This became especially obvious when we got a second dog, a black Shar-Pei puppy named Molly. Maggie tended to instigate trouble, convincing Molly to do something, just like an older sibling may convince a younger sibling. When we would get home and there would be a mess in the apartment (or, in one case at Christmastime, an entire box of chocolate-covered cherries has been unsealed and eaten), Molly would look ashamed and Maggie would look at us as if to say, "I told her not to."

But we knew better.

Not long after we got her I realized I should probably take her to a training class that the pet store offered. We learned basic commands and that the dog was supposed to learn to walk beside us, not pull us along. We needed to learn to be the one in control and the dog needed to learn that simple truth as well.

Maggie wasn't having it. We started with a basic nylon collar. She pulled against it constantly. We moved to a choke chain. She pulled and coughed, pulled and coughed. Eventually we graduated to the last humane resort, the pinch collar. The pinch collar looks like a collar of metal spikes pointing at the dog's neck, but in reality, they won't hurt the dog, just draw together and irritate the dog so they stop pulling.

Nope. The truth is, I never did find a way to keep her from pulling against the leash. Apparently it was more important for her to believe she was in control than to be submissive with reduced irritation.

Acts 26:14-- *When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? You are hurting yourself by kicking against the goads.'*

In this passage Paul is recounting his conversion to King Agrippa. He mentions this term "kicking against the goads." Today, rather than a goad, someone may use a cattle prod. But the principle is the same. A goad was a pointed stick that a farmer would use to prompt a stubborn ox or mule into obedience.

The farmer may call the animal with the word or noise in an effort to prompt it to move. If the mule, for instance, resists the farmer's prompt, the farmer would poke the mule in the backside with the goad, repeating the command. Often this would work and the animal would move. When it didn't, the farmer would apply a little more pressure, a little more discomfort.

Sometimes, however, rather than moving or just standing there, the animal would kick at the farmer. The farmer would jab the goad harder into the animal, causing more irritation, sometimes breaking the skin, but never seriously injuring the animal. Usually this would finally prompt the mule or ox to obey and move forward.

When Jesus called Paul and said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads," he was telling Paul that it is in his best interest to follow him now or Jesus would just prod harder. The New English Translation of the Bible says, "You are hurting yourself by kicking against the goads."

I understand Maggie. I understand Paul. I understand those who are stubborn and resistant to obedience. Heather and I have had these conversations about ourselves and our own children. It is not in her personality to kick against the goads. She's cautious, doesn't like a lot of risk, and is a perfectionist.

I, on the other hand, have to be poked and prodded and in many cases, scarred, to submit sometimes. I can see it as a character flaw, but most people who are stubborn are the same ones that are persistent in the faith, won't back down, won't leave a fight because it's hard.

Here's the point: Jesus won't give up on you, whether you like it or not. If you are under the impression that Jesus will leave you alone if you ignore him, you need to reconsider that. Sadly, if you do get the sense that he has stopped calling you, talking to you, prodding at you, then you seriously need to repent. Either you have

calloused yourself so much against him that you can't hear him, or he is leaving you to your own devices and things are about to get really bad so you can turn back to him. Neither option is a good one. Turn back to Christ while you can still hear his voice.

Every time I took Maggie out of the apartment she was on a leash. She still insisted on going her own way, coughing, wheezing, pulling, but I was bigger, stronger, weighed twice as much and knew where I wanted her to go.

There was only one time she got out of the apartment without her leash. She was almost immediately hit by a car. She was okay and she instantly turned back to me and ran into my arms, knowing that I was going to take care of her.

Ultimately, as long as she was on that leash, Maggie went where I led her. She continued to wheeze and pull and cough, but she went where I led.

Molly, on the other hand, pulled a few times, coughed and wheezed for a moment, then realized that if she didn't pull against me the walk was much more pleasant. She never pulled again.

Thank you, Lord for leading me. Help me to trust you enough not to kick against you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Treasure

Matthew 6:19-20

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

As I was driving in to work the other day I heard on the radio of a recent sale of baseball card at auction which set a new world record for the largest amount ever paid for a single card. USA Today reported:

“A one-of-a-kind 2009 Mike Trout rookie card sold at auction Sunday for \$3.84 million, topping the legendary T206 Honus Wagner as the most expensive sports trading card in history.

The 2009 Bowman Chrome Draft Prospects Superfractor was sold by Goldin Auctions to an unknown buyer for \$3.84 million, but with the buyer's premium added, the final purchase price totaled \$3.936 million.”

Now, I confess, I’m not what you would call a baseball fan, and to be quite honest I don’t even have a clue who Mike Trout even is. And I really can’t get my mind around \$3.936 million, or expressed another way:

\$3,936,000.00 - that’s just more zeros on the right side of the dollar sign than I ever deal with....

But really, 4 million dollars for a piece of cardboard with somebody’s picture on it...?

I found it interesting that the New International Version translation of this passage uses the terms *“moths and vermin,”* whereas most other translation use *“moths and rust.”*

The actual Greek word translated *“rust”* or *“vermin”* is *“brosis”* and has to do with the act of eating, such as rust (oxidation) might corrode or “eat away” at a particular item made of metal.

But further down in Matthew chapter 6 Jesus goes into more of a discourse about clothing, something which would certainly be susceptible to *“moths and vermin”* - critters that like to chew on fabric and clothes... or baseball cards...

I imagine that whoever paid \$4 million for a baseball card probably has it in some sort of hermetically sealed, highly secure environment, safe from both *“vermin”* and *“thieves.”*

But wouldn’t it be a hoot to see Templeton the rat from Charlotte’s Web laid back in the pig sty in a satisfied stupor after having gorged on 4 million dollars worth of cardboard?

The dictionary defines *“treasure”* as:

-Wealth or riches stored or accumulated, especially in the form of precious metals, money, or jewels.

-Wealth, rich materials, or valuable things.

And the last one:

- Any thing or person greatly valued or highly prized

Since someone was willing to pay this amount of money for this particular card, it is obviously *“greatly valued or highly prized”* - at least by them.

Jesus cautioned us over 2,000 years ago, before the Bethlehem Braves or Jerusalem Blue Jays printed their first Major League Dreidel Championship MVP card, not to “*store up*” or even consider these types of things as real “*treasure*.” This kind treasure is at best only temporary and most certainly susceptible to corrosion, corruption or theft.

Jesus goes on to say in verse 21;

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Where is your treasure?

Or perhaps we should ask; where is your heart?

Jesus says they are one and the same...

So perhaps a better question might be; what does your treasure, those things you desire and acquire and “*store up*,” say about your heart?

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

We don't want any

2 John 6-11

Unity is a key word today. "Be united, not divided," we're told.

In our current time a lot is being made of division. We are divided, many say, by race, nationality, culture, sexual orientation, and gender identity. We are to invite everyone into our circle and accept them as they are.

Unfortunately this has been taking place in the church for decades under the guise of "unity." What do I mean by that? I mean that whole denominations, ministers, and believers have been moving away from biblical truth and established doctrine for the sake of "unity."

But "unity" has brought division. Division in the church, but unity with the world.

John wrote this letter to a specific woman and her family or her house church. It was a reminder to be aware of sneak attacks, so to speak, from those who claim to be teachers, but bring a false message.

2 John 6-11-- *6 And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love. 7 I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into*

the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. 8 Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. 9 Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. 11 Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work.

It is crucial that we are mindful of who we listen to when we are taking in spiritual teaching. Fortunately we have denominational umbrellas that give us a good idea of what will be taught. For instance, if I go to another Southern Baptist church there may be some variance in worship styles, church administration and even in teaching, but I know the doctrine will align with other SBC churches, not only in broad terms but also in most specifics. There's a security in that.

The early church didn't have that, and sometimes even in modern times you may not have it. Churches and teachers that are loosely-associated or are not associated with denominations, agencies, or schools, can be tough to know where they stand on certain doctrines.

John is addressing that here. He is telling this dear woman that she and other believers need to tell them, "No thanks. We don't want any of what you're teaching." He said not to even let them into your house. He's talking about hospitality. Not to spend time in fellowship with them. This is a contrast to Jesus in Revelation 3:20:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

By inviting someone in, we are agreeing with them.

Today we see people associated with others because they attended the same event or shook hands in a picture or belong to the same club. For good or bad, we are associated with other people when there is even a tenuous connection.

John said, don't let there be that kind of connection.

What preacher do we have on our television? Whose book do you buy? What ministry do you give to? What church do you attend?

What do those teachers and preachers say about who Jesus is, what he has done, how he redeems us, and what it means to follow him?

One time someone asked me why we didn't do more to unify the churches in the community. I said, "When they come back to biblical teaching, we'll be united."

Brothers and sisters, in a time when the person and work of Jesus Christ is questioned, denied and mocked, where do you stand? Who do you listen to?

In short, who do you let into your house?

Let us be united in Christ.

Thank you, Lord, for your Son and for his work in redeeming me. Thank you for your Word that shows me who I am apart from Christ and who I am in him. Thank you for your Spirit that points me to Jesus and enables me to follow him in righteousness. Thank you for preachers, teachers and believers who speak your truth in love. Give me a discerning heart to follow Christ, despite what wicked teachers may try to convince me of. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

What we know

1 John 1:3

Robert C. Lee once said, "The sweetest sound to anyone's ears is the sounds of his own name."

I had a friend in seminary named Mark. Mark had been a student at Liberty University before he came to seminary. He was already married when he went to college and he said that one time after a football game he bumped into Dr. Jerry Falwell. It wasn't unusual to see Dr. Falwell among the students or at a football game or at the student center.

After a cursory greeting to Dr. Falwell he was surprised to find that the president of the school stopped to speak with him, shook his hand, asked his name, found out he was married, asked his wife's name and offered his blessing with a smile before moving on to the rest of his day.

Even more surprising, when Mark passed Dr. Falwell on campus his senior year, he again offered a cursory greeting.

"Hi, Mark," he said. "How's Gretchen?"

Mark was amazed that of the thousands of people Dr. Falwell must meet, he remembered a 20-second meeting with a freshman student four years before.

Dr. Falwell recognized the value of individual people. When he arrived at Thomas Road Baptist Church, it was a tiny church in Lynchburg, but he committed to knocking on 200 doors a day so that all of Lynchburg would have the chance to hear the gospel.

1 John 1:3-- *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*

When we build relationships with people, the proclamation of the name of Jesus should be a significant part of our relationships. It may not come up in every conversation or even most of them, but when we see the value of individuals, we get to know them and we want them to get to know us and the God we serve.

This comes from talking about what we have seen and heard.

Our friends and neighbors may know about the sports team, position and record of our child and their team, and we may know theirs. But do we ask how we can pray for them? How we can help them? Do we offer ourselves, our abilities, our service, our listening ear, to our neighbors?

I've not been as good at this as I should either. I get it. We get busy, we have stuff going on.

Relationships don't just happen on their own, neither our relationships with each other nor our relationship with

Christ. They take effort, intentionality and persistence to make them work.

Part of our relationship with Christ requires telling others that they can have a relationship with Christ, too.

Penn Jillette, comedian and illusionist (part of the comic magic duet Penn and Teller), talks about a time after a show when a Gideon offered him a Bible. Penn, an outspoken atheist, graciously accepted and then posted a video about it. He said some people get upset about religious people trying to proselytize, or invite others to their religion, but he disagreed. In fact, he offered a great quote for us to keep in mind:

"If you believe that there's a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward...how much do you have to hate somebody to *not* proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"

Wow.

We have been given the good news of Christ not just for us, but for us to share with others. We have all come to Christ because of the faithfulness of someone in telling us about Jesus. We need to be faithful enough to tell others.

Thank you, Lord for the good news of Jesus. Thank you for his sacrifice for our sins and thank you that someone was faithful in telling me about your grace for me. I know there are those around me that need to know. Give me the courage to submit to you, even when it's awkward, and to tell them about the Jesus they've never met. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Without Hindrance

Acts 28:31

I love the book of Acts. Written between 63 and 70 (probably closer to 63), it covers the beginnings of the spread of the Gospel and the Church's relations with Rome. The first part of Acts spend a lot of time on Peter, but after chapter 12 it focuses a lot on the work of Paul.

As a person who loves stories, whether that be stories people tell, books, shows or movies, I'm one of those people who connects to the world through stories. I like to think of the book of Acts as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke.

In Luke 1, the author introduces the purpose of the writing: to relay to "most excellent Theophilus" the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. We don't know who this guy is, but it is presumed that when Luke wrote the sequel, "The Acts of the Apostles", he and Theophilus had formed a friendship, or that Theophilus had lost or stepped down from a prominent role in society or government; Luke did not refer to him as anything other than "Theophilus."

Over Christmas break our family watched the Avengers movies in order. Not in the order they were made, but the order of the story. At the end of most of the movies there are some credits, then what is called a "post-credit scene." In these scenes, there is a brief introduction to the next step in the Avengers saga. It is usually a short dialogue, sometimes introducing new characters. It's the

cliffhanger, a notice to the audience that there is more story to be told.

At the end of Luke, Jesus rises from the grave, appears to some of his disciples, meets the men on the road to Emmaus.

Credits roll.

Post-credit scene: The men of the Emmaus road burst into a room filled with disciples! "HE'S ALIVE!" they cry, barely catching their breath.

BOOM! Jesus appears IN THE ROOM!!

He reminds them of what he said, leads them to Bethany and gets taken up to heaven.

Music swells. Fade to black. Roll the remaining credits.

The book of Acts covers about 30 years of ministry among the apostles. When we read the book of Acts we often think everything takes place in a short window of time. In the scheme of history, sure 30 years is not very long, but when we read it we tend to think of it not more than a few years.

Luke wanted Theophilus to know who Jesus was, the impact he made on lives and what it may look like to be a dedicated follower of Christ. It will require sacrifice, maybe it will require loss of job, friends, reputation, and possibly his life. But the Lord empowers his people to stand and to speak.

Opening scene of "Acts of the Apostles": final commands and ascent to heaven are replayed. The disciples return to Jerusalem, choose Matthias to replace Judas.

Soon the Holy Spirit descends. Pentecost. Healings. Salvations. Persecutions. Spreading Gospel. Stephen stoned. Paul repents. Gospel spreads to the Jews and the Gentiles. The Kingdom of God bursts forth!

Acts 28:31-- *Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.*

These are the last words in the book of Acts. The writings of Luke to Theophilus describe the apostle Paul, primary persecutor of the followers of Christ, doing a complete 180, under house arrest, inviting people into his home to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Unhindered.

The remainder of Paul's life was to live for Christ unhindered. To speak of his grace unhindered. To offer his redemption. Unhindered.

For the last few months we have been living a hindered life. Told where we can't go, how many people we can be around, how close we can be to them and what to wear when we are. We act because we're not sure or because there is so much we don't know.

But the things of Christ redemption for mankind are things we DO know, things we ARE sure of. And yet we are hindered.

Not by law, not by uncertainty to its truth, but by fear, anxiety, worry. I think we are finally getting just a taste of what the persecuted church has been facing head on for centuries. When I say a taste I mean a very small morsel of discomfort. Not imprisonment, not starvation, not homelessness, not beatings, not torture. Not death.

Let us follow the example of Paul, who, even as he did face those things, preached the kingdom "boldly and without hindrance." The leading verses can give us hope and direction to what this looks like:

Acts 28:28-30-- *"Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Lord, thank you that you sought me without hindrance. Thank you that Jesus died for my sin without hindrance. Thank you that your Spirit lives in me and speaks to me without hindrance. Thank you that someone shared with me the gospel of Jesus without hindrance. Help me to do that same, that those who hear will come to trust in you. Without hindrance. In Jesus Name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

More Than Just A Rock!

1 Peter 2:4-5

I don't know what it is about rocks, but I have always had a fascination with them. I have been a collector of rock since I was a small boy. Everywhere my family went on vacation, I brought home rocks. I literally have rock from all over the world where friends have brought them back to me from their journeys as well.

I even brought a few rocks home from our vacation. There was an abundance of rocks in the stream where Josh and I fished. Fishing with Josh and walking on the thousands of rocks in the stream reminds me of the story of a prospector who was walking along the shore of a mountain stream searching for gold or any other precious object he might find. It wasn't long before he stumbled upon a small canvas bag that had a draw string tied shut securing the contents of the bag. His first thought was that it was a bag of gold nuggets that an unfortunate prospector had dropped unknowingly. So he hurried to open the bag but was quickly disappointed when he realized there was no gold, only a hand full of small stones. He poured all of them out in his hand and thinking they were worthless ... he began trying to skip them across the top of the water.

Just before he threw the last stone, a sparkle caught his eye and as he took a closer look at the stone, he realized it was a large gemstone. They all were. They all had been. That is when he also realized that the fortune he was searching for had been in his hands, and he had ignorantly thrown it away.

1 Peter 2:4-5 (NLT) ... *"Come to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by the people, but he is precious to God who chose him. [5] And now God is building*

you, as living stones, into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are God's holy priests, who offer the spiritual sacrifices that please him because of Jesus Christ."

Peter reminds us that Jesus is the precious stone that so many reject and throw away. As God's Son, Jesus is infinitely more precious than a bag full of gold or diamonds or anything else our mind can comprehend, and yet so many treat Him with disdain and contempt, rejecting His love, grace, and mercy. And sadly, there are so many Christians who don't fully understand nor appreciate the precious cornerstone Jesus has become in their lives.

Dr. Jeff Schreve ... The great King of the universe invites us to sit at His feet and love on Him, learn from Him, and have fellowship with Him.

Before you go one step farther in your day, why not hit the pause button and take some time to engage the Lord and give Him some of the much deserved praise that belongs to Jesus. Let praise flow forth from your mouth and out of your heart. Praise and thanksgiving are always the spiritual sacrifice that is acceptable to God. God is so good to include us into His family and then choose to live in us through the person of the Holy Spirit.

Father, I am amazed that You would desire to have fellowship with me each day and that You have made me a spiritual temple for Your dwelling place. Thank You for being my solid foundation on which I can build my life and faith. In Jesus name, Amen!

Pastor Randy Green

Build That Wall!

1 Peter 1:14-19

Hear me out.

There's a lot of talk about walls right now. In our nation there are three specific walls that come to mind when we talk about this now.

First, of course, is a security wall at our southern border. Some say it is necessary to reduce the influx of illegal immigrants from flooding in; others say it is racist against the latin community. Still others say it is all-out anti-immigrant and, therefore, white nationalist.

Then there is the wall that separates church and state. Some say this means that the church and the government should have nothing to do with each other; others say this means the church should not get a tax break (a special favor from the government) and that churches should not be able to set their own standards. Still others say this wall is one-sided: the state cannot prohibit the church from practicing freely, but the church can direct the state in matters of morality and value.

Another wall is the wall around individual homes and neighborhoods. These walls, some say, protect the entitled, who at the same time, living safely behind their walls, direct others that they have no right to protect themselves and their possessions with firearms and, now, local police.

I watched a movie recently, one that I had wanted to see for several years, but never had the opportunity: Pacific Rim. The premise of the movie was that giant monsters from the sea (think Godzilla) called Kaiju were attacking cities. Nations, in response, built giant machines, piloted in pairs, to fight and destroy them. Eventually it wasn't enough and they had to build walls along the coasts. The Kaiju busted right through one "indestructable" wall, leading to a turn in the story.

1Pe 1:14-19-- *As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*

In 1 Peter we are called to be different. "Be holy, because I am holy," God says. The word *holy* means "set apart" or separate. It means we are to be different from those around us, specifically, from the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and practices of the culture in which we live.

In **John 17:14**, Jesus tells us to be "in the world, but not of the world." In other words he says that even though we have to live in the town, the family, the state, the school, the workplace, or wherever we happen to be, we

ought not believe, think and act like those around us. We are to be "set apart". Holy.

In the Bible, walls are a good thing. They are boundaries and protections. A city with a wall for protection was called a fortified city. In order to take advantage of a sanctuary city, you had to be inside the walls before your accusers reached you; not in sight of the walls, not in the general area. Inside the walls.

Even in Revelation 21, John describes his vision of the New Jerusalem as having high walls, with 12 gates. But, unlike earthly cities in which the gates were closed at night for security, the gates of New Jerusalem will never close. There will be no need for security once evil has been handled and evildoers cast into outer darkness.

Why all the talk of walls? Because in order for us to be set apart we have to start setting up boundaries intentionally. Walls don't build themselves. The term "wall" sounds exclusionary and uncompassionate, but it doesn't need to. We lock our doors at night, we put filters on our computers and phones, we read our kids' texts and social media accounts, we tell them "no" when they want to spend the night with friends we don't know well or trust.

We even drift away and maybe end relationships with people who we know aren't healthy for us.

These are all walls. But here's the things. All the walls we've talked about have gates. They have a way to allow us or others to pass through. We would continue to have

ports of entry through a border wall, sanctuary cities and fortified cities had gates in and out, even the wall between church and state allows for some interaction and cooperation.

The point of a wall is not to be completely cut off from those around us, but is instead to allow us a way to differentiate ourselves from them. Peter tells us we are "foreigners" (some versions say "aliens") here, and that our ancestry is even different when we look at it from a spiritual perspective.

It's time to make the decision to be set apart, to move into sanctuary, the set up personal boundaries and to recognize our alien status. Unlike the wall in Pacific Rim, our boundaries need to be strong enough to withstand whatever onslaughts we face.

In short, it's time to build that wall.

Thank you, Lord, that you have provided not just the call to holiness, but the possibility of holiness. Thank you that you did not just save me to add a new list of rules, but have instead provided a sanctuary and even a new nature. Give me the courage and wisdom to set up appropriate boundaries in my life so that I reflect the light of Jesus boldly and clearly. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Finding Peace!

Colossians 3:14-17

Peace. Everyone needs it. Most people want it. How do you find peace in the midst of a chaotic world? How can I find peace in my life storm? The drug store doesn't have peace in a pill or liquid form. You won't find it at the ABC store either. Amazon doesn't carry it! So where do you find peace? To find peace ... you have to know what it is and where it comes from.

Peace is not the absence of life's problems, but it is an awareness of the presence of Jesus in your life. But why is that important? It is because Jesus is the greatest Peacemaker of all time and eternity! Jesus is the Prince of Peace.

John 14:27 (NLT) ... Jesus said ... *"I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid."*

Peace in your life has to begin with you coming to know God. You can never have the peace of God until you have peace with God through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Think of this peace that Jesus gives as a precious gift that will guide you to have peace with others throughout your lifetime.

Colossians 3:14-17 (NLT) ... *"And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony. [15] And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful.*

[16] Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise. Use his words to teach and counsel each other. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with

thankful hearts. [17] And whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, all the while giving thanks through him to God the Father."

Paul Purvis ... *If you want tranquility through life's difficult, disappointing, and discouraging times, you must allow God's supernatural peace to exercise authority over your natural self.*

Q ... Well, how do you do this?

... [16] Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise.

You find peace from God as you focus and dwell on His living and written Word! This kind of thing just doesn't happen. You have to be intentional with God's Word. God's Word will never just dwell in you until you make a conscious effort and decision to focus on it! You can't find peace in a bottle, but you can find it in the Bible!

Dwight L. Moody ... *The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible.*

If you want peace ... take your Bible off the shelf ... start reading it on a daily basis ... commit it to memory ... and rely on God's truth to calm your storms. Look up and read **Psalms 119:11**.

~~~~~  
*Lord Jesus, I am praying to you for the peace I need in the middle of my storm. Please calm my fears and help me to trust in you completely. Thank you Jesus for helping me find peace.*

**Pastor Randy Green**

## Endeavor to Persevere

Romans 5:3

*“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;”*

The Clint Eastwood movie “The Outlaw Josey Wales” came out in 1976 when I was still in high school. Pretty much every high school kid (guys anyway) in the 1970's loved a good Clint Eastwood movie.

There is one scene that I recently rediscovered. It is the scene where the Josey Wales character (Clint Eastwood) meets the character Lone Watie played by Indian Chief Dan George. Lone Watie told of the sufferings and struggles of his people; being uprooted from their lands and “The Trail of Tears.”

But he also told how they had vowed to “endeavor to persevere.”

Certainly none of us are experiencing anything close to that type of suffering. Nor do we share in the type of suffering that the first century Christians to whom Paul is writing in his letter to the believers in Rome were experiencing.

In fact, in relation to those types of sufferings, the verse in 2 Corinthians 4:17 that talks about;

*“our light and momentary troubles...”*

is probably a more apt description of the Coronavirus “aggravations” we have all had to deal with (admittedly, some more than others) for the past 6 months.

Even so... who wants to have to deal with aggravations, much less (more)... sufferings...

But the Apostle Paul says;

*“...we also **glory** in our sufferings...”*

Wait a minute...

*“**glory** in our sufferings...?... ”*

Having a store clerk ask; “where is your mask?” Or, out of an abundance of caution and prudence, continue to have to practice “social distancing,” could hardly be considered on the level or scale of what might be called “*suffering*.” But how many of us actually think of these things as “*glorious*?”

In fact, you don’t have to look very far to find griping and complaining, rather than glory and rejoicing!

It is a reality that this pandemic has affected people differently. For those who have lost loved ones, those who have actually had the virus, or those who have lost their jobs or livelihood, there may indeed be very real “*struggle*.” For most of us however it has been at worst an “aggravation.”

But the promise from God’s Word applies to both;

*“...we know that suffering produces perseverance;”*

Aggravations, and sometimes perhaps even struggles will no doubt come into all of our lives at some point. As believers we have an enemy who seeks to destroy - if not our lives then at least our joy.

It is up to each of us individually to decide how we will respond to those struggles. Will we trust God's Word? Again, from 2 Corinthians 4:17;

*"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."*

Realizing the glory that awaits us, will we;

"Endeavor to Persevere?"

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**



# Frustrating Intelligence

1 Cor 1:18-19

How many movies have been made, or books written, about criminal brilliance? These are stories of criminals who are very smart and have been able to elude capture for years, sometimes decades.

Maybe you've heard of Dan Cooper. Or maybe you're more familiar with the name D.B. Cooper. On November 24, 1971 A man bought a plane ticket at the counter of Northwest Orient Airlines in Portland, Oregon. It was a one-way ticket to Seattle. After ordering a drink on the plane, he passed a note to a flight attendant that he had a bomb in his briefcase, opened it a little and showed her the red sticks with wires attached. He then showed her another note to give to the pilot, demanding four parachutes and \$200,000.

The plane landed in Seattle and 36 passengers got off the plane in exchange for the money and parachutes. The pilot was directed to fly to Mexico, but somewhere between Seattle and Reno, NV, Cooper jumped from the plane with the money.

The FBI looked at over a thousand suspects or persons of interest before finally closing the case in 2016, having never found out the identity of Cooper and never recovering the money.

Had this been Hollywood, a savvy agent with a knack for skirting procedure and irritating his superiors, would have

tracked him down using some unorthodox methods. He would have showed up at his door. Mr. Cooper, opening the door, would have asked, "What took you so long?" Accolades from the irritated superior, witty one-liner from the agent, kiss from the girl, roll credits.

But nope, Cooper has yet to be found. As far as he and everyone else is concerned, he got away with it.

**1Co 1:18-19--** *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."*

We may not spend a lot of time dealing with criminals. We talk with ordinary people with legitimate life concerns, but they often still have a frustrating intelligence. People my grandfather would say are "too smart for their own good."

We've all met people like that. Maybe we've been those people: people who have such confidence in their knowledge that they are unbending. Last year a college student asked me, "I have a friend who said there's no evidence for God so they don't believe. What do I say?"

"Ask them how much of all the information in the universe they know. Be generous and give them a full percent of all the knowledge that is available. Ask them, 'Let's say you know one percent of all the knowledge and all the information in the universe. Is it possible that the other 99 contains evidence of God?'"

People object to the premise of Christianity because it doesn't make sense as a story. God is angry with everyone for offending him, so he sends his son to be cruelly put to death by the people who have already made him angry, because he loves them? Then all they have to do is admit they're terrible and God will forgive them? Yeah, that seems strange.

But that's kind of the point. In Ephesians 2 we're told we are saved by faith in Christ's finished work so we can't claim credit for it. This is God frustrating intelligence. This is him taking the opportunity for arrogance out of the equation. No one likes to be humble by nature; no one likes to submit. Those are things we do out of necessity. Being called to do that is offensive.

Telling a God we can't see that we are willing to set aside our own understanding, to change our perceptions, to submit to his authority and to risk everything, is foolish. That's what Paul is saying. It's why people roll their eyes or look at us sideways when we say we are Christians. It's why they think it's lame that we voluntarily give money to churches where preachers lie to us (their perspective, remember). It's why they don't understand our desire to forgo so many pleasures for the sake of a Jesus who may not have existed, a God we can't see and a Bible filled with myths.

But Paul reminds us, "this is foolish to them, but for us, those who are being saved, it is power!" Then he quotes Isaiah, where God says, "I will show them things that don't make sense, they won't be able to answer it, but they will know it is real."

If your unbelieving friends don't understand why you go to church, why you believe in Jesus, why you volunteer your time, why you give your money, don't worry about it. People that saw Jesus face-to-face, watched him perform miracles and heard him teach, didn't all believe in him either. Pray for your friends and family, trust in the Lord and continue to pursue a relationship with him in Christ.

In July 2019, Robert Rackstraw died in Southern California. Some people believe he was D.B. Cooper. Whether he was or not I can't say; no one can. But D.B. Cooper got away with his crime. If he's still alive or if he's dead no one knows.

Either way, he didn't really get away with it. We all have to stand before God. Don't let your intelligence keep you from confession and repentance. Don't let yourself be fooled into thinking you don't need to receive God's grace.

*Thank you, Lord, that you draw us to yourself, working around our weakness, our arrogance and our self-reliance to show us the truth. Help me to say past my own insight so I can see what you want to show me and can follow in obedience. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Me and My Family!

Joshua 24:15

In Spiritual terms, worship and service go hand and hand. You cannot truly worship God unless you are willing to serve Him.

**Joshua 24:15 (NLT)** ... *“But if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”*

Imagine trying to walk in Moses’ shoes. Joshua was called to do just that. To lead sheep and goats is one thing, but people! Joshua quickly came to understand the meaning and reality of a fearful and daunting task.

**Charles Stanley ...** *His beloved leader, Moses, had just died. And now, Almighty God was asking him not only to take the position Moses once held but to lead an entire nation to a land where Moses ... through whom the Lord had worked many miracles ... had not been able to enter.*

On top of that, Joshua well knew that God’s people had a propensity to worship the gods of other nations. So, in a moment of great courage he gathered all the tribes together and Joshua issued this amazing challenge. As he began speaking to them, he reminded them of all the awesome things that God had done for them. Then he set forth his challenge. He did not challenge them to accept God or even to seek out God for the provisions they needed. No ... Joshua simply appealed to the people to give God their faithful service.

**Tim Sizemore ...** *Too often people see God as a genie in a bottle to call*

*on as needed. Yet we are to work serving the Lord with our lives because of what He has done for us ... not just when we want something from Him.*

**Q ... Just what is service?**

Well it is certainly more than just showing up for church. And it’s more than just posting on face book that you believe in God. The Bible says that even Satan believes in God, but that doesn’t mean that he serves Him. In fact he does quite the opposite!

There are more ways to serve God than you can shake a stick at. That’s a whole lot! You can greet people at the front door on Sunday morning. You can help cutting the grass. You can invite a friend or a new neighbor to church. You can take a meal to a needy family. You can rock a baby in the nursery or teach children in Bible study. There is no end to how you can serve God.

Serving God brings Him glory and it speaks loudly to the world. Serving is our earthly calling and Joshua knew it! And that is why accepted his role as the spiritual leader of his family and said ... *“But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”*

**Q ... How are you serving the Lord?**

~~~~~  
*Heavenly Father, I know you have uniquely created me
to do a work for you that no one else can do.
Please help me to give you my heart
and faithful service.*

Pastor Randy Green

M & M's

Psalm 19:14

*"Let the words of my **mouth**, and the **meditations** of my heart,
be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength,
and my redeemer."*

A couple of weeks ago, in our Adult Bible Study Class, I shared a short video of my Mom's blessing and prayer before a meal we shared together.

Part of that prayer was;

"forgive us for things we say and do... and even think..."

Ouch... "even think"

In Psalm 19:14 David writes;

*"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart,
be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my
redeemer."*

Most of us are pretty good at controlling "the words of our mouth..." especially when we think the preacher might be listening, or someone we respect or perhaps someone we don't want to offend or have think less of us...

But truth be known, we probably all say or have said things that we wish we hadn't.

The book of James has quite a bit to say about:

"Taming the Tongue"

In verse 5 of chapter 3 James writes:

"Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark."

Or in our day and age we might say;

"Consider how much damage can be done by one ill-thought text or malicious tweet."

Down in verse 9 of that same chapter we read:

"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be."

'Nuff said about that...!

But what about; "the meditations of our hearts..."

Another version of the Bible translates that verse this way:

"Let my words... and my thoughts... be pleasing to you, Lord,"

How is your thought life these days?

With so much negativity out there it might be easy to let our minds wander to scenarios that are NOT *"acceptable in Your sight, O Lord,..."*

A few months ago I shared a song based on a passage in Philippians chapter 4 where the Apostle Paul gives us the key to making sure our thoughts are pleasing to the Lord:

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

As we heed the wisdom of the Apostle Paul in this passage, and are daily transformed by the renewing of our minds that he writes about in Romans 12:2;

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Then we can join with the Psalmist in praying the prayer of supplication that our not only our words, but also our very thoughts would be pleasing and acceptable in the sight of God.

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

On Your Knees

Proverbs 9:10

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom..."

For the past several weeks our Sunday morning Adult Bible Study class has been focusing on the book of Proverbs. The theme of this verse is woven throughout the entire book as we have discussed just what this *"fear of the Lord"* really means.

I recently came across this story that I think helps give some perspective.

A visitor to the Alps was making his first ascent of a towering peak, led by two experienced guides. After hours of climbing they finally reached the summit, and the lead guide stepped aside to allow the visitor to be the first on the peak.

Forgetting the violent winds blowing across the back side of the peak at that height, the visitor surged forward to step on the summit, but the lead guide quickly grabbed him and pulled him down:

"On your knees sir! You are not safe here except on your knees."

This is an accurate picture of how the believer, or anyone for that matter, should view God. The safest approach to the Almighty is with an attitude of awe and reverence for who He truly is.

Like the lion Aslan in C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, God can be gentle but, at the same time, dangerous when His holiness is forgotten or ignored.

The same God whom the Apostle Paul tells us;

"...sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father!" (Galatians 4:6) - or as we would say; *"Daddy,"*

Is the same God whom the Psalmist tells us;

"... is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day." (Psalm 7:11)

Now surely, no sane person would want to experience the *"wrath of God,"* but therein lies the problem. By failing to acknowledge God for who He is, and by rejecting the relationship He offers through Jesus Christ and thereby the opportunity to call Him *"Abba, Father,"* God's Word tells us that;

"Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done." (Romans 1:28 -NLT)

When we look around today and see all of the things going on *"that should never be done,"* we can ultimately point back to a disregard for, and lack of reverential acknowledgment of God and who He is as Ruler over all.

This lack of respect and reverence for God, this lack of the *"fear of the Lord"* as the ultimate Authority has produced an ever growing group that seem to have a disregard and disrespect for *all* authority.

The theme we chose for our Bible Study in Proverbs has been: *"Living wisely in a foolish world."*

All you have to do is watch the news or check out social media and it is apparent that this world is getting *"more foolish and foolish"* all the time.

I can remember growing up, when my mom had had *"enough of all this foolishness"* from her three misbehaving sons, wrath in the form of her choosing would ensue... or worse yet - the fateful phrase;

"You just wait til your daddy gets home..."

At some point of God's choosing, He will have had enough of all this foolishness, and His wrath will be revealed.

"Let no one deceive you with empty arguments, for God's wrath is coming on the disobedient because of these things." (Ephesians 5:6)

But the promise for the believer is:

"...God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thes. 5:9)

In the meanwhile we can address and approach God like the royalty He is; or else prepare to meet Him as the Judge He is. There is only one *wise* choice;

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom..."

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Poof! There it is!

Exodus 32:21-24

Let's be honest, we're not big fans of accountability. We love to do whatever we want and if something bad happens to us or if we get caught we look for a scapegoat.

Interesting thing, the scapegoat. I'm sure you know what this is. Today, it describes someone blamed for something they didn't do, or at least didn't do on their own. The scape goat, however, according to Leviticus 16, was part of a pair. On the Day of Atonement the high priest was supposed to sacrifice a bull for the sin of he and his family, then he was to take two goats and cast lots for them. The goat that drew the short straw was to be sacrificed for the sin of the people and the other was to be the scapegoat.

Once the first goat was sacrificed on the altar, the priest would lay hands on the second goat (the scapegoat, imparting the sins of the people onto it in public, then the goat would be sent out into the wilderness, taking the sins of the people with it, never to return.

We'll come back to the scapegoat, but let's look at the story of the golden calf.

Exo 32:21-24-- *21 He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?" 22 "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You*

know how prone these people are to evil. 23 They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' 24 So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

According to Dr. Jeffrey Tigay, the golden calf may not have been intended as an image of God or of a different god, but may have been intended as a substitute representative of God since Moses had gone missing. Many times, he says, the bull or calf does not represent a god himself, but rather his mount, on which he was to appear. It could simply be an image that denotes the presence of the god.

In other words, an idol.

After all, an idol is a representative image of a god that is not immediately present and visible. God's declaration that the people are not allowed to create an image of him is very clear. God's anger, and therefore Moses' anger, was a pretty clear image of how God felt about the idol and about his people bowing before it.

But one of the issues of the story, especially for the purpose here, is that Aaron didn't take any responsibility.

"What's that?" asks Moses, red-faced and pointing at the golden calf.

"See, what happened was, come on, you know these guys, they're pushy and whiny, and they were scared because they didn't know where you were. They said, 'make us a god to lead us!' I didn't want to do it, so I said, give me your jewelry. They gave it to me and I just threw it into the fire and, poof! Out popped this calf. So... yeah."

Moses, oddly, didn't quite believe him. Things go downhill from there.

There's a lot to consider, but we'll just look at a couple of them. First, where did they get that gold? From God. He told them as they were about to leave Egypt, "Go ask your Egyptian neighbors for their stuff. I'll make them like you and be generous." There's a good chance that the Israelites took God's generosity and turned it into an idol.

We do that all the time. God provides for us, we abuse our wealth, freedom, the charity of others, etc, refuse to recognize God for it, and it often gets in the way of our relationship with him.

Second, Aaron refused to take blame for the creation of the calf. "I put the gold in the fire and a calf came out." Ta-da!

We have to be accountable for our choices. We can't blame society, our parents, the teacher, the government, for our personal decisions and failures. We have to own up to them. We can't push those off on someone else.

There's good news, though; we don't have to. We have a scapegoat. Not in the way it is used today, but in the way God used it. God required one goat to be sacrificed privately on the altar, but a second one to be sent away in the view of all the people so they would have an image of what had already been done through the sacrifice.

John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The Jews at the time knew exactly his reference. John was saying, "There he is! The scapegoat who will carry your sins far away and they won't return to you!"

Jesus wants to take your sins and carry them away. Alexander McLaren says, "What was divided in the symbol between the twin goats is all done by the one Sacrifice, who has entered into the holiest of all, at once Priest and Sacrifice, and with His own blood made expiation for sin, and has likewise carried away the sin of the world into a land of forgetfulness, whence it never can return."

Rather than bearing your sin or casting it onto another person, let the spotless Lamb of God pick it up and carry it away.

Thank you, Lord, for the Lamb of God, Jesus. Thank you for the image of the scapegoat to let us see your work in redeeming us. Help me trust in Jesus to carry my sins away. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Making Good Use Of The Tongue

Proverbs 12:18

How often have you engaged in a conversation with someone and later felt convicted by what you said or didn't say? I confess it happens to me far too often. My earthly father always told me ... ***Think about what you're are going to say before you say it. Once you speak, you can't take words back.*** Through Solomon God says ...

Proverbs 12:18 (NLT) ... ***"Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing."***

Proverbs 15:23 (NLT) ... ***"Everyone enjoys a fitting reply; it is wonderful to say the right thing at the right time!"***

Whenever you speak to a person, you have to make a decision and you will make it!

- ... will I dominate the conversation?
- ... will I try to out story the person I'm talking too?
- ... will I use this moment to get to know them better?
- ... will I intentionally try to lead this conversation into a spiritual direction?
- ... will I seize the moment and try to lead them to trust in God?
- ... will I talk with them about a relationship with Jesus?

Mark 2:15-17 (NLT) ... ***"That night Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. (There were many people of this kind among the crowds that followed Jesus.) [16] But when some of the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw him***

eating with people like that, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with such scum?'

*[17] When Jesus heard this, he told them, 'Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. **I have come to call sinners**, not those who **think** they are already good enough.'*

Notice the difference in how Jesus used words and how the Pharisees used them!

- ... Jesus cared about people and tried to encourage them with what He said ...
- ... the Pharisees looked down on people and used their words to belittle them ...

Proverbs 14:21 (NLT) ... ***"It is sin to belittle one's neighbors; blessed are those who help the poor."***

Jesus came to help people. He came to speak life into us. He came to heal humanity's most devastating infirmity ... sin. Everywhere Jesus looked, He had work to do. He fed hungry people. He healed sick and dying people. He even set people free of demons. But His greatest work was to be the Savior.

Luke 19:10 (NCV) ... ***"The Son of Man came to find lost people and save them."***

Each time Jesus found and saved a sinner ... He commissioned them to **go** and **tell** others what God had done for them. They were to witness of God's grace and mercy.

- ... the woman at the well left her water pot to share her story with a whole village.
- ... the lame man told about who healed him and so did the blind man.
- ... the demon possessed man testified about being set free by Jesus.

... Mary told of how Jesus her Savior had loved her unconditionally.
... Peter could not stop talking about how Jesus restored him to
fellowship after he denied His Savior.
... and the list goes on and on!

In the marketing world, it is said that your best advertisement is a satisfied customer. Blessed and satisfied believers are exactly how the gospel has spread from one generation to another. That is how Jesus planned for the Good News to be shared with the world.

Acts 1:8 (NLT) ... “But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Charles Stanley ... *You have been freed from sin and you have an incredible opportunity to share the hope of Jesus Christ with others. Your life is a living testimony of the healing power of the Savior.*

So why not pray asking God to show you how to share your faith with others ... let us train you in how to be an effective witness ... and then be sure to look for the opportunities that God provides to share your Jesus story with a lost person.

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***Lord, please help me to use my words in such a way that I encourage people and give you the glory that you so rightfully deserve.***

***In Jesus name ... Amen!***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# Live In Faith Not Fear!

Psalm 91:9-11

I grew up being afraid of the dark. The path that ran from our house to my grandmothers was the darkest place in the world for me as a child. My mother was always sending me down to granny's house for a cup of sugar or something else she needed for cooking our supper. And most of the time ... it was after dark. That's what made me such a fast runner.

We live in a world where people are afraid of so many things. For many, this world that we live in has become a very scary place. Everybody seems to be afraid of something. So many are literally drowning in fear. What's crazy is that most of the fear we struggle with are situations that we have absolutely no control over. You can't control the stock market, what the government decides to do, what people do, what your kids do, when viruses come and when they go. There is even only so much you can do to stay healthy.

Yet even though there are so many things that make us fearful that we cannot control, we can control how we respond when we are tempted to live in fear. Just look at what the psalmist wants to teach us:

**Psalm 91:9-11 (NLT)** ... *"If you make the Lord your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, [10] no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your dwelling. [11] For **he orders his angels to protect you** wherever you go."*

That's right ... God has angels that are assigned to protect us. Some of us obviously need more than one! I am sure I kept a half dozen or more busy when I was growing up! God knows how to protect us!

I said Sunday, Christian, we are at war! How we respond to the attacks of Satan is critical as we seek to mature in our relationship with God. You have two options: fear or faith. By responding in faith, God helps us to overcome our fears as we place all our trust in Jesus Christ.

If you remember, Satan used the very words of our text today to tempt Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:5-7). Satan knows Scripture. He just doesn't use it correctly. For example, he twisted the words of this passage trying to get Jesus to stumble. He likes to do the same thing to you and me. That is why we have to know the Scriptures. We need to be able to recall God's truth when Satan is lying to us! Whenever Satan misuses Scripture, it is critically important that we follow the example of Jesus and properly apply biblical teaching.

... that is why we should **memorize** Scripture ...  
... then we can **meditate** on God's Word no matter where we are ...  
... and that helps us to **mobilize** God's Word in our faith to combat the vicious attacks by our enemy!

Friend, whenever you are tempted to retreat in fear, respond in faith and trust your Lord to protect you instead!

**Romans 8:15 (NLT)** ... *"So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family—calling him 'Father, dear Father.'"*

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Heavenly Father, I choose today to trust You in all things. Please help me to live faithfully as I seek to glorify Your holy name, Amen.

Pastor Randy Green

Seasons

Jeremiah 8:7

*“Even storks in the sky know their seasons.
Turtledoves, swallows, and cranes are aware of their
migration, but my people do not know
the requirements of the Lord.”*

Well, we finally had a few cool days this week! It seems like this past summer has been a relentless onslaught of heat and humidity, but at last we can have a sense that fall is just around the corner.

Growing up, one of my favorite signs that autumn had indeed arrived was the sound of migrating geese. I can recall looking up into the sky to see great V's of Canada Geese, wondering just how far they had flown in their annual southern migration.

That was then, this is now...

If you have driven on Battery Park Road between the church office and Church Street in Smithfield in the past few years, you have probably had to slow down, or even stop, to allow the ever growing flock of “resident” Canada Geese to (at their own sweet leisure) waddle across the road.

And don't even get me started on the ones that from time to time decide to take up “residence” at the church property, and all of the “evidence of their residence” that goes along with that. (Just watch where you step...)

Now, I realize that the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) is not specifically listed here in Jeremiah with the storks, turtledoves, swallows, and cranes who are;

“Aware of their migration...”

But I do have to wonder, at what point did they decide to ignore their instinct to carry out their annual migration?

And I say “decide,” but really geese don't have a will whereby they can “decide” to do this or that based on a conscious decision, they function in the mode of instinct. So how, why, or when, did they “decide” to go against their instinct?

One theory goes like this:

“release of geese raised in captivity into the wild gave rise to a population that had never been taught as juveniles “how” to migrate .”

In other words, though migration is instinctive, the young geese have to be taught, they have to “learn” how to migrate, which is actually related to their ultimate survival.

We have probably all heard the phrase: “survival instinct.” It can be defined as;

“the instinct in humans and animals to do things in a given situation that will prevent them from dying.”

In the 8th chapter of Jeremiah the prophet describes a very different scenario.

A scenario where *“Death will be chosen over life...”* (vs 3)

Kind of sounds like the “season” we are in today in our country. So I ask the same question of us: how, why, or when, did we as a people “decide” to go against our instinct? The instinct to choose and value the life of every individual.

Some may look at recent events, while others may point back to more distant historical atrocities.

But ultimately, in order to value *all* life we must realize that we are *all* created in God's image. And in order to do that - we must realize and acknowledge that there is in fact a God.

Although the Apostle Paul tells us in Romans that we can know about God through creation;

"For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse."

(Romans 1:20)

We are also reminded that faith, saving faith, comes by the Word of God;

"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God"

(Romans 10:17)

And therein in lies the problem...

The same problem that Jeremiah wrote about;

"They have rejected the word of the Lord," (vs 9)

A few weeks ago in our Adult Bible Study class the theme, or "Central Truth" of the lesson was;

"All people have a choice to make:
follow God or reject Him."

In this Coronavirus, Covid-19, social unrest "season" in which we are living, the ultimate choice for all remains the same; "follow God or reject Him."

But for the believer there is an ever increasing need, and responsibility, to make sure that people *"know the requirements of the Lord."*

The need to teach the young geese how to migrate.

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

The Division of Redemption

Luke 12:51-53

How many civil wars and revolutions have there been? I once had a history teacher in high school who said, "I don't like the term 'civil war.' War is never civil; that's why I prefer the term 'war between the states.' He is right to say war is not civil. We also know that the term "civil war" means a war that is in-house, so to speak.

The world has been shaped by conflict between two groups of people sharing the same nation. We have been involved in several. Our own American revolution comes to mind and of course the war between the states. But we've also been involved in revolutions all throughout Central and South America, Korea, Viet Nam and the middle east. Deposing dictators, arming revolutionaries and helping to set up governments that align more with our own way of thinking in hopes that it would bring peace and prosperity.

In our own homes and communities, however, conflict often arises, even at the direction of Jesus.

"Excuse me? But Jesus is about peace."

We'll get to that. But first:

Luke 12:51-53 NIV-- *"Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

So, yes, Jesus is about peace and unity among the believers, which was prompted also by the apostles. He is about grace and forgiveness as well.

But he also recognizes the hearts of people and the things that enslave us. For some, freedom looks good enough to allow Jesus to break their chains and demand a change of thinking, believing, behaving and treating others. For others who *think* they are free, they are unwilling to suddenly add a yoke of slavery, failing to recognize that they are already enslaved but Jesus offers freedom.

I recently watched the movie Harriett and she faced the same thing. She, having found freedom, spent her life risking it to bring others to freedom. Even so she would sometimes run across slaves who would rather risk lifelong slavery, which they knew, than seeking freedom they had never experienced and where escape may cost their life.

Matthew Henry says, "The bringing in the gospel dispensation would occasion desolations. Not that this would be the tendency of Christ's religion, which is pure,

peaceable, and loving; but the effect of its being contrary to men's pride and lusts...We should be zealous in making known the truth, for though divisions will be stirred up, and a man's own household may be his foes, yet sinners will be converted, and God will be glorified."

In other words, Jesus intent may not be to cause interpersonal conflict, but due to the sinful pride of man, conflict is inevitable when the gospel is displayed.

On social media have you ever been blocked, unfollowed, unfriended due to your boldness in proclaiming truth? Many have and many more will yet. My experience in counseling is that most people who are willing to see a counselor are willing to go once or twice, but they quickly stop coming, usually when they realize that counseling is just cleaning the mirror so they can see themselves more truthfully and begin making changes.

Who wants that? Almost no one. And the gospel is the same. "Jesus loves me" is very popular. "Have mercy on me, a sinner," isn't.

Regardless of how people respond to the truth of the gospel, carry on. Speak it, live it, give it away. And expect resistance and possibly losing relationships for it.

Thank you, Lord, for giving me your gospel and saving me through it. Give me the courage to speak the truth, no matter the cost. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Not Just a Number

Luke 6:31

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Most anyone who has ever been to Sunday School or Vacation Bible School at some point in their life recognizes this verse as “the Golden Rule.”

I found it interesting to learn that some form or version of the Golden Rule is found in the writings or tenets of at least seven different major world religions, and in the philosophy of numerous great teachers throughout history. It is considered the simplest statement of ethics ever conceived.

Its widespread acceptance speaks of this universal truth:

“People just want to be treated like people.”

It seems like the human dimension and element is fast disappearing from our society. We have all no doubt experienced the “joy” of trying to get through to the “help” (ha!) center of a particular business, financial institution, or service provider.

You know the drill: Press 1 for English, enter your account number, enter your pin, enter your birth date, enter your zip code... enter your shoe size, etc. etc.

Our very existence is now defined by a series of numbers!

I have heard it said; “That which makes us truly human - spirit, soul, and the image of God - is being replaced by bits of digital information.”

And this time of pandemic has only made it worse. I know of individuals who have had very little contact with “the outside world” since March. The “personal touch” is not only discouraged, it is in some instances actually outlawed! And yet, medical experts warn of the mental health dangers of continued isolation.

In our current environment of “social distancing” we are offered the option (no thank you) of having an “app” downloaded to our phones in order to “track” if we have come in proximity to someone who may have tested positive for coronavirus.

Out of curiosity, I checked out the Virginia Department of Health website to see just how this works. Here is what the site says:

Step 1: Download the free app

Step 2: Once you opt-in to the notification system, the Exposure Notifications System will generate an anonymous “**token**” for your device. To help ensure these anonymous tokens can't be used to identify you or your location, they change every 10-20 minutes.

Step 3: Your phone and the phones around you will work in the background, without draining your battery or data, to exchange these privacy-preserving anonymous tokens via Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) technology. This is a passive process that begins once you opt-in and functions without the app open.

Step 4: On a daily basis, your phone downloads a list of all the anonymous tokens associated with positive COVID-19 cases and checks them against the list of anonymous tokens it has encountered in the last 14 days.

Step 5: If there's a match, the app will notify you with further instructions from your public health authority on how to keep you and the people around you safe.

Again... no thank you. I don't really care to be identified as an ever changing "token."

This verse from the 6th chapter of Luke is part of Jesus' teachings on a wide range of topics, many having to do with interpersonal relationships; Love for our enemies, not being judgmental, being generous to our neighbors, and;
"Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful." (vs 36)

In this time where there is so much "depersonalization" going on, how do we see people? As a potential "token" to be avoided? Do we see them with the same love and mercy that the Father has shown to us?

May we all strive to "treat people like people" as we put into practice "the Golden Rule," and;

"Do to others as you would have them do to you."

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

National Revival

Acts 3:19

Proverbs 28:2 (NLT) ... *“When there is moral rot within a nation, its government topples easily. But with wise and knowledgeable leaders, there is stability.”*

You don't have to be a rocket scientist or a biblical scholar to understand what Solomon wants you and me to know! Morally rotten nations fall from power pretty easy. Well, America is ripe for this fall. Only two things can save us from our sinful selves:

... a spiritual Awakening among the people and a Revival in the church.
... oh, and yes, godly leadership.

Only God can provide the power to turn any nation around. And it has to be done God's way. There is no other option ... except to press on in moral rot and failure.

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.

George Washington

Acts 3:19 (NASB) ... *“Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”*

There is a beautiful story in the third chapter of Acts about a man who received something that he had never had. Peter and John, in the name of Jesus, had just healed a crippled man by the gate of the temple, known as the Beautiful Gate. There this lame man received something that he had never had ... the strength and use of his legs. He had been unable to walk from birth. As a result, the people of the city were amazed by this miracle and this gave opportunity for Peter to preach a very powerful sermon. Peter's sermon focused on three simple points: ... Repentance ... Redemption ... Restoration.

1. To experience revival ... there must be **repentance**. Peter told these Jewish people that they needed to repent. To repent is to change one's mind about himself and his sin. Please understand that repentance is far more than being sorry you got caught. More that troubling conviction or feeling bad. Repentance clearly means to turn from your sin ... to quit your specific sin.

2. To truly experience a revival ... there must be **redemption**. Think of it this way: ... to repent means to turn **from** and to be converted means to turn **to**. Redemption is the result of turning from sin and self and turning to the Savior ... Jesus Christ. Until you are willing to turn from your sin, you cannot place saving faith in Jesus Christ.

3. The goal and result of true revival is **restoration**. It is only when our sins are forgiven that we genuinely experience times of spiritual refreshing and renewal. Just like the strength of the cripple man's legs was given to him, when our sins are forgiven by Jesus, He gives us a right relationship with God. Restoration brings to us a spiritual refreshing in the form of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

As you study Peter's sermon, it is easy to see that he was calling for there to be both an individual and a national revival. He is also very clear that there can be no revival without repentance!

Our nation desperately needs to be spiritually awakened to God. You can't revive something that is dead. The vast majority of people in our nation have no relationship with God. What we need is a powerful moving of God's Holy Spirit on open and repentant hearts.

In a similar way, Lord, Your church needs a spiritual revival. We know you but have drifted away from our first love and have become like the world in that we are too preoccupied with life and materialism. We need to repent and come back to you. We need Your forgiveness and restoration.

The choice is ours. Every individual has to make their own decision. God stands ready to forgive and restore ... even to redeem the lost of this nation. That needs to be our prayer and our focus.

2 Chronicles 7:11-16 (NLT) ... *“So Solomon finished building the*

Temple of the Lord, as well as the royal palace. He completed everything he had planned to do. [12] Then one night the Lord appeared to Solomon and said, 'I have heard your prayer and have chosen this Temple as the place for making sacrifices. [13] At times I might shut up the heavens so that no rain falls, or I might command locusts to devour your crops, or I might send plagues among you. [14] ... Then ... if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land. [15] I will listen to every prayer made in this place, [16] for I have chosen this Temple and set it apart to be my home forever. My eyes and my heart will always be here.'

God loves you so much that He will do anything to get your attention so that you will turn around and come back to Him. He longs to be in a healthy relationship with you. If you will come, then just maybe others will follow and that might lead to the national revival that our nation

desperately needs!

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*Lord, in this moment, I give you the right and opportunity to point out my personal sin. Help me to see what you see when you look at me. Please Lord, turn my conviction into true repentance that leads to my redemption and restoration. Please forgive my sin and change my life and destiny.  
And Lord, please turn our nation back to You.  
In the precious name of Jesus, Amen.*

*Pastor Randy Green*

# Get Big!

Hebrews 10:35-39

Man, if I want to get my wife fired up, all I have to do is dry some of her clothes. I learned a long time ago that if she has clothes that need to be washed, I'd better move on to some other chore. I can't count the number of times she has come to me with something and asked, "Did you dry this?"

Ruh-roh, Raggie.

Yes, that was a written Scooby Doo impression and yes, I have had to look her in the eye and admit that I didn't read the tag that said, "line dry only."

Lots of things cause stuff to shrink: heat in the dryer will shrink some clothes (cotton specifically), chronic stress causes the brain to shrink. As we age and our spine compresses and the disks dehydrate, even people shrink.

Dehydrating or freeze-drying fruit shrinks it.

Sometimes when we go through a hard time we tend to think that God shrinks. In other words, that the God who can do anything, can't do *this one thing*.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that God has a problem with the one who shrinks.

**Heb 10:35-39--** <sup>35</sup> *So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.* <sup>36</sup> *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.* <sup>37</sup> *For, "In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay."* <sup>38</sup> *And, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back."* <sup>39</sup> *But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.*

Shrinking (or shrinking back) in this case, refers to those who cower in fear. The Greek word here is *hypostello*. It describes a variety of phrases that are all vibrant in their description: to draw back or withdraw (describing a timid person); to withdraw oneself, to cover or to be timid; used of those who because of timidity, hesitate to avow what they believe; to be unwilling to utter because of fear; and to shrink from declaring, to conceal or to dissemble.

I can think of many situations in my own life in which each of these descriptors have played a role. How about you?

The author, in chapter 10 describes Christ's sacrifice, then prompts us to cling to Christ and "to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess" (10:23). I like that word unswervingly. It gives me the image of maintaining a firm grip on the steering wheel to maintain a line when I hit a patch of black ice or I'm hydroplaning on a wet road. The thing is, it is not a natural feeling to hold a line. Our natural reaction would be to slam on the brakes and

try to steer in a different direction. But the natural feeling is wrong; it's dangerous.

In the same way, when we face hardship or persecution, teasing, mocking and bullying for our faith, our tendency is to become small, timid and quiet about Jesus. That's natural. But God says, "I take no pleasure with the one that shrinks back."

Shrinking is the natural course of things. But we are not natural, are we? We are supernatural! We have been given new natures! We have not been given a spirit of fear, but of power!

One thing that I have discovered online are these videos called "The Breakdown". These are videos where a real-life professional in a field rates movies in their depictions of those fields. Fighter pilots, snipers, detectives, doctors, spies, etc. have all done these videos. One that I liked was from a secret service agent.

In one movie clip, someone attempted to assassinate the President and a secret service agent jumped in front of the president with arms and legs spread. The real-life agent rated that as a 10/10, saying that is exactly how it would be.

Dan Bongino, a political commentator and former NYPD officer and Secret Service agent on presidential detail, said that the hardest part of being on that detail was learning to get big. "It's our nature," he said, "to shrink and to hide when shots are fired. As police officers we are taught to conceal and to cover. Concealment is

finding a place to hide behind and cover is a place that will block a bullet. But in the presidential detail we had to learn to get big. It's completely unnatural. Getting big means that when a shot is fired, you make yourself as big as possible so that a bullet hits you instead of the President. Instead of hiding, you make yourself larger in hopes that you would be shot instead of the President. That's your job and it's the hardest part to learn."

As believers, our tendency may be to shrink away from threats. It's a natural thing to do. But it is in times of persecution and threat that the Lord can be most glorified through the boldness of his people. In nations where persecution is the strongest, the Church grows the most. It is the boldness of God's people that brings people to Christ.

No one wants to surrender to a wimpy God with wimpy people. It is when people are willing to stand strong for their faith, that others are drawn to the power that brings that boldness.

This is no time to shrink back, to cower or to hide. It's time to get big.

*Thank you, Lord, for the boldness and power you grant in the name of Jesus! Thank you that you do not call me to do what I can do without you, but to things I need your power for. Give me boldness to speak your name and to glorify you before those around me, even those who mock me and threaten me. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

## Wait on the Lord

Psalm 27:14

*"Wait on the Lord; Be of good courage,  
And He shall strengthen your heart;  
Wait, I say, on the Lord!"*

Hurry up and wait!

Anyone who has had an appointment that they made a mad rush to get to, only to find that once they got there they still had to wait what seemed like "forever..." before they were actually seen, has experienced this "hurry up and wait" phenomena.

Or then there is the time you make an Olympics qualifying dash through the airport to make a 9:15 departure connecting flight, only to get to the terminal and find that dreaded notice: Flight 2347 to Norfolk is delayed, new approximate departure time is 10:30.

Hurry up and wait...

But waiting is not something that is unique to our fast-paced generation. Throughout God's Word there have been examples of individuals who found themselves waiting;

- Noah, waiting for the rains to come, and then waiting for the flood waters to recede.
- Abraham, waiting for the son of promise.
- David, waiting for the fulfillment of his anointing as King of Israel.
- The Old Testament nation of Israel, waiting for the promised Messiah.

Even in the New Testament we find Jesus' own (half) brothers, waiting for his "time to come." In John 7 they are urging Him to go to Jerusalem to *"show yourself to the world."* (vs 4)

A recent English translation of the Thomas a' Kempis paraphrase of John 7:6, where Jesus told His brothers to go on to Jerusalem for; the right time had not come for Him; but anytime was right for them, simply reads:

*"We're on different timetables, you and I."*

Do we ever feel like God is saying to us; "We're on different timetables, you and I?" Does it seem like God's schedule is different from ours?

We live in a world that is: Go, Go, Go...

But sometimes God says: Wait, Wait, Wait...

David Jeremiah expressed it this way:

"It takes time for God's providential orderings to fall into place and it takes a while for our own faith and patience to fully ripen."

These days especially, many people have expressed a frustration over having to wait for this pandemic to be over and done with. Having to wait for life to return to some semblance of "normal."

The question is; what do you do while you are waiting? When you are perhaps even *forced* to wait.

It is interesting to "people watch" this type of scenario play out in the airport departure area.

When the flight delay is announced some people show their obvious impatience and frustration. They may go up to the counter as if the airline representative can make the delayed incoming flight get there any sooner so that we can all eventually board and depart. Or they may pace around and check the flight status board every 5 minutes.

Then there are those who simply settle in with a book (or nowadays a phone or device) and just wait. Perhaps even *learn* something while they are waiting.

As it has been said many times before, this pandemic did not catch God by surprise. In fact, as sovereign ruler of the universe, this pandemic was right on His time table.

God wants to teach us during our times of waiting as well. The question is: are we going to sit still long enough to hear and learn from Him? Are we going to get on "His time table?"

The Psalmist reminds us that those who do wait on the Lord will have their hearts strengthened.

*"Wait on the Lord; Be of good courage, And He shall strengthen your heart; Wait, I say, on the Lord!"*

***-Pastor Ronnie Bunch***



# Pray or Worry!

Philippians 4:6-7

How much of your day is spent worrying? What do you do when you worry? Does worry keep you awake at night? Do you allow your mind to be dominated by anxious thoughts? Do you spend your time thinking about the worst possible scenario? Look to what the apostle Paul wrote:

**Philippians 4:6-7 (NLT)** ... “Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. [7] If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”

Unfortunately, our mindset is such that it is easier to worry than it is to trust God with our situation. Friends, God hears our prayers.

**1 John 5:14-15 (NLT)** ... “And we can be confident that he will listen to us whenever we ask him for anything in line with his will. [15] And if we know he is listening when we make our requests, we can be sure that he will give us what we ask for.”

No matter what it is, the difficult situations you encounter and problems you face do not come as a surprise to Him. God is never caught off guard. So when troubles come your way, instead of wasting your time worrying, why not spend some time in prayer.

***Worry is a nasty weed that is killed only by prayer.***  
**Dr. Jim Perdue**

It has also been said that people who do not pray are usually great

worriers. Without God in your life there is certainly much to worry about. But with God, all things are possible. Prayer makes the impossible possible. Prayer also eliminates worry.

Friend, if you are a child of God ... then you are in the very best of hands. Prayer reminds us that no matter what you face, God can handle it!

***If you are going to pray, don't worry;  
if you are going to worry, don't pray.***  
Old Jamaican proverb

It's always better to pray than it is to worry!

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***Father, I am asking You to help me so that when problems come my way, my natural inclination will be to trust You instead of worrying. I am blessed to know that every time I pray
Your answer is peace.***

I know that there is nothing that I will face that you can't take care of. Please Lord, teach me to trust You, believe in You, and depend on You in prayer.

Thank You for hearing my prayer!

Pastor Randy Green

Write it Down!

Psalm 102:18

*“Let this be written for future a generation,
That a people not yet created may praise the Lord.”*

About 8 months ago, at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, as Pastor Randy encouraged us to pray, he also encouraged us to keep a journal.

How’s that going...?

OK... Confession time for me.

I started out really well. I was pretty much daily entering specific prayer requests and different things God was teaching me in my journal. And then, as God answered those prayers I made a notation of that, sometimes just a check mark or a “PTL!” in the margin.

But then, somewhere along the way my journaling became less frequent, until finally hardly at all. Now don’t get me wrong - I’m still praying (probably not near as much as should be) - but I have not been writing those prayers down in my journal as I had done before.

The other day I found that journal I had been using some months ago and as I read through the requests - and God’s answers - it quite literally caused me to weep.

There were so many evidences of God’s faithfulness and provision in that little book in my own handwriting. Had I not gone back and reread them, I probably would not have even thought about them, but there they were.

Most folks know that Deb and I like to travel. On most of our trips I have kept a journal of our own journeys and adventures.

On occasion I will go to my desk and pull out one of those travel journals and instantly be transported back to the particular destination and experiences we shared together in “The Further Adventures of Ron and Deb.” (Cheesy I know but that phrase somehow ends up in the first line of every trip chronicle)

The point being; having a written record of a particular trip allows us to relive and better remember the experience.

The writer of Psalm 102 cries out to God in his affliction, in fact the heading in my Bible reads: *“A prayer of an afflicted man. When he is faint and pours out his lament before the Lord.”*

He begins with;

“Lord, hear my prayer; let my cry for help come before you.”

And he then goes on to describe to the Lord his pitiful state. That lament is quickly followed by a declaration of God’s sovereignty and compassion;

“But you, O Lord, sit enthroned forever...” (vs 12)

“You will arise and have compassion...” (vs 13)

And then down in verse 18;

*“Let this be written for future a generation,
That a people not yet created may praise the Lord.”*

And here it is.

The struggles and afflictions of one who poured out his heart to God are recorded for us to read thousands of years later. With the psalmist we can praise the Lord for His sovereignty and compassion. His answers to the prayers of His people.

I like what David Jeremiah has to say about journaling:

“When we journal our walk with Go, it helps us remember His faithfulness to us. Our lives go by in a blur, and our memories fade with time. What a treasure to record answers to prayers, special promises God gives, and thoughts during life’s crucial moments. Writing it down helps us clarify our thoughts, and it leaves a testimony to others.”

If you have been faithfully journaling over these past months I commend you! If, like myself, you need to get back into it I encourage you to do so. Journaling helps us document, for ourselves, and who knows, perhaps even for generations to come, our walk with God; His faithfulness and compassion.

So... Write it down!

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Surprising Change

1 Peter 4:1-5

Comedian Russell Brand has struggled with addiction for a long time. A few years ago he was finally able to get clean and to date, has since maintained his sobriety.

A couple of years ago he was on a late night talk show and the host asked him about his history of addiction, his claims of being free from it, and the doubts that people have about his ability to stop using drugs and to be clean from this point forward. "What do you say to those people who doubt?" he asked.

"I say I used to mess my pants when I was a baby, but I don't do that anymore either."

His argument, though humorous and a little crass, is very straightforward and speaks to the reality of change. Even if some are surprised at the drastic changes in your life.

Have you ever reconnected with someone you haven't seen or spoken with in several years, maybe even decades? Maybe you've gone to a homecoming or a class reunion. Or maybe you've found each other on social media. Are you surprised at how they've turned out or the kind of person they are now?

I have seen party animals in high school become people who proclaim a solid faith. I've seen those who proclaim Christ drift away into atheism or very liberal theology. I've seen star athletes lose that athletic build and those

struggling with weight when we were younger, looking fit and trim, holding medals at the end of a race. And even though some are unsurprising, many are. Honestly, at first glance they are all surprising, but quickly becomes apparent that something has changed in the way they chose to live.

1Pe 4:1-5-- *1 Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. 2 As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. 3 For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do--living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. 4 They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. 5 But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.*

Peter tells us that we are to arm ourselves with the same attitude Christ had, as well as those who followed God in obedience and suffered in the body as a result (read chapter 3). In fact we know that we will all suffer sometimes and we are told in 3:17, "For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."

Then Peter tells us that enough is enough. We have spent enough time living like those who do not follow Christ, but now it is time to live as followers, even drawing contempt. He says that people will even be surprised that we don't join them in their behavior, and they will be abusive because of it.

Why are they abusive? Probably because it's a light in their eyes.

Lots of men have heard (and even more have said), "Hey, stop it. You're making us look bad." When you are with other couples and you open the car door for your wife or when you buy her flowers for no reason or help with chores, there will be some who say, "You're making me look bad."

Here's the kicker, though: we all have to give an account of our actions. Will we be able to say the Lord has transformed us more and more into the image of his Son? Or will we make excuses he can see right through?

As Peter said, you've spent enough time in the past doing what they do; now it's time to live for the will of God.

What do you need to change, that may be a surprise to others? Ask God to help you live for him, no matter what.

Thank you, Lord, for not just saving me, but working to change me. Help me be different enough that others are surprised, but also that it opens opportunities for me to talk about you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

More than Favor

Titus 2:11-12

Every good sports movie where the team or athlete has to prepare for a big challenge, has a montage. A montage is a short highlight scene where they are training and we see them getting better, faster, stronger. Rocky running through the snow, doing pull-ups and punching meat; the hockey team doing drills and lifting more and more weight; the person trying lose weight, running, buying better foods, and walking past the elevator to the stairs.

And it's all set to some awesome music.

Through the montage we see someone changing their life in little steps over time, but it's all compressed into a brief scene so we get the chance to see all the work and all the effort and all the little decisions that they make.

Real life means we don't get a montage. We can't just make a few decisions for a short time and grow like that. We have to make consistent good choices, drop bad habits permanently, pick up good ones permanently, and grow strong enough to resist temptations all day, every day. But where do we start, and how does that happen?

Tit 2:11-12-- *11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. 12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,*

According to blueletterbible.org, here is the usage here of the word grace (Greek, *charis*): "of the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues."

Look at all that is involved in God's grace. It is not just God showing us favor. Because he shows us favor and kindness, he does SEVEN other things for us! If you had a coach who said, "To meet your goals, I'll help you exercise, learn the exercises, learn about nutrition, teach you to shop for good foods, cook them, season them to your taste, help you lose desires for bad things and gain good desires so you can stay on track, and keep you from getting distracted while you do it," you would hang on to that coach!

That's exactly what God provides through his grace. Not just forgiveness, but he teaches us how to say no to the bad stuff and to gain a desire for the good; and he provides the strength and understanding to do it, too.

That's a God to hang on to.

Thank you, Lord, for your grace. Thank you that rather than just calling me to live like Christ, you give me what I need to make that happen. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Moving in

1 Chron 11:4-9

Maybe you have moved around a lot in your life; maybe you haven't. If you have moved a lot, like those who have had a long military career, you have made a science of moving out of a place, moving into another, what to keep out, what to keep packed away, etc.

I moved around a lot growing up. Every 3-4 years our family would move and we would start over in several areas of our lives: relationships, school, church, getting to know the town, etc. In my case it prepared me for ministry. In ministry you never know when the Lord is going to call you to somewhere new. I've been blessed to be able to serve in only 3 churches: 3 years, 8 years and 14 years. I never had a childhood home. My kids have really only known one house, one town, one church.

As believers, it's important that we maintain one primary residence, no matter how many times we move or how far away.

1Ch 11:4-9-- *4 David and all the Israelites marched to Jerusalem (that is, Jebus). The Jebusites who lived there 5 said to David, "You will not get in here." Nevertheless, David captured the fortress of Zion--which is the City of David. 6 David had said, "Whoever leads the attack on the Jebusites will become commander-in-chief." Joab son of Zeruiah went up first, and so he received the command. 7 David then took up residence in the fortress, and so it was called the City of David. 8 He built up the city around*

it, from the terraces to the surrounding wall, while Joab restored the rest of the city. 9 And David became more and more powerful, because the LORD Almighty was with him.

Jerusalem is the most fought over piece of real estate in the world; specifically, the Temple Mount is the most fought over piece of real estate in the world. Israel conquered it from the Jebusites and it has continued to be fought over for centuries. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all see Jerusalem as a holy city, important to the heritage of their faith.

While this passage is about the conquest of Jerusalem by David and the nation of Israel, there is one statement here that I really want to draw your attention to.

In verse 7 it says, *David then took up residence in the fortress*. That's an important statement. Everything else hinges on his residency in the fortress.

In **Psalms 18:2** David says, *The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

With everything we face it is important that we have a refuge. Look at all the ways in this one verse that David describes the Lord: rock, fortress, deliverer, refuge, shield, horn, stronghold. While the term horn seems out of place, it is sometimes used to describe the peak of a mountain, the highest place where every advancing enemy can be seen far away, where it is more easily

defended, and as military strategy will tell you, the high ground is the best for both attacking and defending.

There's a second point here, though, that we don't want to miss: *He built up the city around it, from the terraces to the surrounding wall (v 8)*. David's starting point for building was the fortress of his residence.

We sometimes try to build up our lives as threats pop up or opportunities arise, but we don't do it from our fortress. We don't place the fortress of our Lord as the centerpiece and say, "Everything in my life needs to flow from this place; Everything I have and do, must have this fortress at the center."

If we want our lives to be well-guarded, prosperous and easily defendable, we need to take up residence in the Fortress and build up everything else from there.

Lord, thank you for being my fortress. Thank you for the example of David, who rested in you. Help me to see my need in you and to make you the primary residence in my life and to build everything else from there. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Old Age

Psalm 71:9

*"Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
Do not forsake me when my strength fails."*

OK, I guess it's official.

I turned 62 this past month which made me eligible to collect Social Security, so I guess I am now officially "OLD."

Never mind that I have been getting the AARP invites for the past 10 or so years, there's just something about being "officially" old enough to collect Social Security that adds a bit of weight to the "OLD" equation.

Some of you have probably heard me say from time to time; "I might be getting older, but I refuse to grow up." Nevertheless, as the effects of aging creep up, we can feel pretty vulnerable.

When I am working on a building project for example, it seems to take me twice as long to do half as much these days. (Of course most of the extra time is spent looking for where I may have laid down my tape measure or pencil...)

In Psalm 71 David looks at himself as an old man. The great Shepherd King of Israel shows his personal vulnerability as he shares the concern of his heart with his Lord, seeking reassurance that even in his old age God would not "put him on a shelf."

David had led a very rich and full life. A true warrior poet, he had fought many battles and reigned as king. He made beautiful music and wrote numerous psalms.

In his youth he is described as:

*"glowing with health and had a fine appearance and
handsome features."* (1 Samuel 16:12)

But now... he is old...

Perhaps he felt that at some point he would be too old to be useful. Perhaps we may feel that way also.

David cried out to God in his need for reassurance;

"Do not forsake me when my strength fails."

David understood that his strength was not his own, but from God. He proclaimed this truth in Psalm 73:26;

*"My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of
my heart and my portion forever."*

His goal was to finish his life well, allowing the testimony of God's work in his life to shine to the very end. As we grow older may that be our goal as well.

May we claim the truth of Ephesians 2:10, that;

*"...we **are** God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do
good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

Realizing that the *“good works”* that He has prepared in advance for us to do, He will also equip and strengthen us to do, right up until the time when He calls us home.

May we then be able to proclaim with the Apostle Paul;

*“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith.”* (2 Timothy 4:7)

- (the elder) Pastor Ronnie Bunch

There's another way

Phil. 4:6-7

There's a huge focus on mental health nowadays. That's not a bad thing. Since the proliferation of social media, two mental health issues have been on the rapid and steady increase: narcissism and depression. In short, narcissism prevents you from seeing your flaws and failures, and depression keeps you in a perpetual state of sadness and social isolation. Why have these been on the increase? Because on social media, people either praise you or criticize you. Those who place a lot of stock in the reactions and comments of their social media followers, are deeply and persistently affected by them. Apart from updating the church's website and social media accounts daily, I haven't been on social media for 2 years. I quickly make the updates and leave. It's been great!

Since the COVID lockdowns, the CDC says 220,000 people have died from the virus. News has come out this week that an additional 110,000 are estimated to have died as a result of anxiety. This includes refusal to attend medical appointments for long-term care (chemo, transfusions, etc) and follow-ups, opioid abuse and addiction, and suicides due to depression and hopelessness.

But there's another way to deal with our circumstances.

Phil 4:6-7-- *6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God,*

which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We can't do anything about the reality that there is a new virus among us. We can't do anything about what our company decides to do with our jobs. We can't do anything about the decisions our government leaders will make. At least not to a point. We can vote, we can express our opinions, we can manage our money and we can follow guidelines to keep from getting or spreading the virus (at least reasonably so).

But ultimately we need to focus on prayer. We are told not to be anxious. "But, Art, I'm an anxious person." Here's a fun fact. If God commands it, it's possible to do. That means that when he says not to be anxious, he makes it possible not to be anxious. How? by following the rest of the verse: prayer, petition, thanksgiving. Tell God about what worries you and ask him to (a) settle your heart and mind, and (b) to resolve the issue itself. Be diligent in asking. Verse 7 tells us that when we do this, God WILL guard your heart and mind. Picture a soldier at the door to your mind, turning away worry. "ID, please. Anxiety, is it? You don't have clearance here. Move along."

Worry has never helped in the past. Why give it access now?

Thank you, Lord, for your peace. Help me rest in you and call on you when I'm overwhelmed. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Electing Godly Leaders

Proverbs 14:34 (NLT) ...“Godliness makes a nation great, but sin is a disgrace to any people.”

Proverbs 28:2 (NLT) ...“When there is moral rot within a nation, its government topples easily. But with wise and knowledgeable leaders, there is stability.”

1 Timothy 2:1-4 (NLT) ...“I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. As you make your requests, plead for God’s mercy upon them, and give thanks. [2] Pray this way for kings and all others who are in authority, so that we can live in peace and quietness, in godliness and dignity. [3] This is good and pleases God our Savior, [4] for he wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.”

1. Pray for people to get out and vote.
2. Pray for people to vote a godly convection.
3. Pray for godly leaders to be elected to govern us.

Luke 12:1-3 (NLT) ...“Meanwhile, the crowds grew until thousands were milling about and crushing each other. Jesus turned first to his disciples and warned them, ‘Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees—beware of their hypocrisy. [2] The time is coming when everything will be revealed; all that is secret will be made public. [3] Whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be shouted from the housetops for all to hear!’”

John 16:13 (NLT) ...“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not be presenting his own ideas; he will be telling you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future.”

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*Father, I desire to vote intelligently in this election. I pray that you will bring to light the things I need to know so I may vote in line with Your plan, will and purpose.*

*May things not only come to light for the Christian community, but may things be made clear to the unbelieving community as well. I pray that what is right would be so clear that even unbelievers would vote using wisdom and demanding honesty and uprightness from our politicians.*

*Dear Father, in the name of Jesus, may the citizens of our nation become so weary of sin and degradation in our nation’s leaders that they will begin to seek out godly leaders to represent them on every level of government. Give such leaders favor with the public and the media. Father, please help leaders to be elected who will have favor for Christians, the Church, and Your kingdom. May Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. In Jesus name, Amen!*

*Pastor Randy Green*

# Jesus the True King!

Philippians 2:5-11

**Luke 23:1-2 (NLT)** ... “Then the entire council took Jesus over to Pilate, the Roman governor. [2] They began at once to state their case: ‘This man has been leading our people to ruin by telling them not to pay their taxes to the Roman government and by claiming he is the Messiah, a king.’”

**Matthew 27:11-14 (NLT)** ... “Now Jesus was standing before Pilate, the Roman governor. ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ the governor asked him. Jesus replied, ‘Yes, it is as you say.’

[12] But when the leading priests and other leaders made their accusations against him, **Jesus remained silent**. [13] ‘Don’t you hear their many charges against you?’ Pilate demanded. [14] But **Jesus said nothing**, much to the governor’s great surprise.”

Jesus well understood that the politics of His day was diabolically opposed to Him and His rule. The powers to be wanted nothing to do with Jesus. Jesus was a threat to their way of life, control and power. They needed Jesus out of the way and out of their hair, and so they decided to take Him out no matter what the cost. That’s when Jews and Romans, two groups who hated each other, joined sides to accomplish their wicked scheme. Satan can and will use anyone who will let him to do his dirty work. But neither Satan nor sinner can change the truth ... Jesus is the true King! Always has been and always will be!

**Tony Evans** ... *The further a government drifts from God ( which means it seeks to become its own god ), the more it sets itself up for heavenly political action. ( ... for judgment! )*

One day ... every human being will stand before **Jesus** the King!  
Take note of the greatest political statement in the Bible:

**Revelation 19:11-16 (NLT)** ... “Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. And the one sitting on the horse was named Faithful and True. For he judges fairly and then goes to war. [12] His eyes were bright like flames of fire, and on his head

were many crowns. A name was written on him, and only he knew what it meant. [13] He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and his title was the Word of God. [14] The armies of heaven, dressed in pure white linen, followed him on white horses. [15] From his mouth came a sharp sword, and with it he struck down the nations. He ruled them with an iron rod, and he trod the winepress of the fierce wrath of almighty God. [16] On his robe and thigh was written this title: **King of kings and Lord of lords**.”

One day **Jesus** will return to rule from earth!

**Revelation 1:5b (NLT)** ... “... and from **Jesus Christ**, who is the faithful witness to these things, the first to rise from the dead, and **the commander of all the rulers of the world**. All praise to **him** who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us.”

**Colossians 1:15-17 (NLT)** ... “**Christ** is the visible image of the invisible God. **He** existed before God made anything at all and is supreme over all creation. [16] **Christ** is the one through whom God created everything in heaven and earth. **He** made the things we can see and the things we can’t see—kings, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities. Everything has been created through him and for him. [17] **He** existed before everything else began, and **he** holds all creation together.”

1. (15) Jesus **created** all heavenly and earthly kingdoms.
2. (16) **All kingdoms** exist by Him and for Him.
3. (17) Every kingdom, including America, is **dependent** on Christ to hold us together.

Our nation desperately needs **King Jesus**. We all need **King Jesus**. Will you join me in praying for the people of America to open up their hearts for **Jesus** to come into their lives. Pray that God would humble us so that we might be receptive to the Lordship of **Jesus Christ**. Pray that we will choose to bow our knees and hearts to the true King ... **King Jesus!**

**Philippians. 2:5-11 (NLT)** ... “Your attitude should be the same that

Christ Jesus had. [6] Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. [7] He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. [8] And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. [9] Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

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Father, we repent and ask your forgiveness for our sin and rebellious attitude. Please forgive us and turn our nation to Yourself. Come, Lord Jesus, into our hearts and into our lives. Change us from our wicked ways. In Jesus name, Amen!

Pastor Randy Green

Nonfiction

John 17:17

"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."

I love to read a good mystery novel. Especially if it is a British mystery. I have quite a collection of them on my bookshelf (shelves) at home. Included are many of the well known writers; Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, P.D. James, as well as a number of lesser known ones.

Some of the best authors are able to paint incredible word pictures. The enjoyment in reading their work comes from not only an interesting and original plot, but also from their vividly descriptive narratives.

Of course many of the more well-known works have been made into movies or television series, but there is just something about engaging the mind through reading. The books that linger in our minds long after we've put them down illustrate the power of a good story.

But all of these works are found in the "Fiction" section of the bookstore, be it brick and mortar or online.

Jesus often taught in parables, stories, to illustrate a point or drive home a truth. Jesus knew the power of a good story. Jesus knew that the stories' illustrations act as windows to the mind to illuminate eternal truths.

But here is an interesting fact: Even as Jesus spoke in parables or stories, He was speaking truth.

In Matthew chapter 13, Jesus told the *"Parable of the Sower,"* which evidently left many of His listeners scratching their heads. In fact His disciples asked Him;

"Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

(Matthew 13:10)

For some, Jesus' answer is a hard truth to accept;

"In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;

you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

For this people's heart has become calloused;

they hardly hear with their ears,

and they have closed their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

hear with their ears,

understand with their hearts

and turn, and I would heal them." (Matthew 13:14-15)

It's kind of like reading the book versus watching the movie or TV series. Studies have shown that when you are reading there is all sorts of cerebral activity going on as your brain transforms the written word into mental images. However when you sit in front of the TV screen your mind pretty much shifts into neutral.

Obviously there were no TVs for folks to watch in Jesus' day, and in fact very few people could read the written word, even if they could get their hands on a copy.

So Jesus told stories.

But the people's problem in this case was not that their minds were in neutral, but that their hearts had grown callous. Their hearts were in "park."

*"For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes."*

What they were seeing and hearing - parables and stories that illustrated and illuminated eternal truths - was not making it from their eyes and ears to their hearts.

As Jesus prayed for His disciples (and all future believers) in John 17, He asked His Father to;

"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."

God's Word, from Genesis to Revelation, does not just *contain* truth... it *is* truth. God placed all of the stories and parables that are in His Word to guide us to the sanctification that comes as we accept His truth and;

"understand with their (our) hearts and turn,"

as He promises healing and restoration;

"...I would heal them."

And that is truth... Nonfiction...

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Once more, from the top

Mark 1:1

From *Star Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope*, through every other film in the series, the iconic scroll is used to give some backstory to the adventure you are about to watch onscreen. In the *Lord of the Rings* series, there is a voiceover by the Elf queen Galadriel to set the stage.

The Bible begins with the words, "In the beginning, God..." Other parts of the Bible start with, "In those days..."

The point is, we all have a backstory, a story that tells how we got to where we are. Have you ever actually tracked your own backstory? People do it to look for blame for their hardships. They blame it on their parents, bullies, bad bosses, etc. But do we do the same thing with credit? Specifically, giving credit to God for your story?

I like how the gospel of Mark opens up:

Mar 1:1-- *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,*

That's a great opening if you ask me. And he starts at Jesus' baptism. Why? Because that was when the ministry of Jesus started and Mark was focused more on the works of Jesus than his family history or even his teachings. It's what Jesus DID that drew Mark's attention.

Where does the Jesus story begin with you?

People sometimes ask how I came to Harvest Fellowship in Smithfield, Virginia. On occasion I've answered by saying a Cub Scout recruiter visited my school when I was in third grade.

Obviously they look at me like I've lost my mind. So I clarify. When I brought the card home and asked my parents about Cub Scouts they agreed I could join. Before sixth grade we moved to Florida and I found an incredible Boy Scout troop which pushed me hard and I made Eagle Scout at 13. At 15 we moved to Georgia and we joined a church where I got involved in the youth group. God saved me and called me to ministry. When I graduated college I was called to a small church where the chairman of the search committee was a Scoutmaster. He said, "He's an Eagle Scout. I know Eagle Scouts. We want him." The pastor of the church left a few years later to pastor a church in Norfolk, VA. While there, they planted a church and he was in the church planter network. Another church was being planted at the same time so the pastors got to know each other. When the pastor of Harvest Fellowship saw this other pastor's name on my references he called him first. A few months later we were at Harvest.

So I'm at Harvest Fellowship because a Cub Scout recruiter visited my school when I was in third grade.

That may seem like an oversimplification and I agree with that, but there is a lot of story along the way.

The point is, we need to recognize God's work in our lives even when it was long before we recognized it to be God's work.

I want to encourage you to take some time and trace your backstory. Even before you were a believer, even before you had any interest in following Christ, can you now look back and see how God worked to bring you to Himself?

I heard one comedian make fun of the phrase, "I found Jesus." He says, "Yeah, like he didn't know where you were first."

He's right. We know he knows where we are, but do we think of God as setting a course for us to run across him? Give God the credit He's due. He's worked a long time and laid out a lot of plans to make sure you know he loves you and is taking care of you. Let him know you recognize it and appreciate it, then look for his continued work in your life. And give him credit for that, too.

Thank you, Lord, for watching out for me and for laying out a path for me to find you. Help me to recognize your continued work in me and to give you credit and praise for all you do. Give me the compassionate boldness to point others to you as I go. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

I'm not calling you that

Ruth 1:20

The Bible is filled with name changes: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, etc. In the Hebrew culture, names mean something. Babies didn't even receive their name until the eighth day after their birth when they were presented at the temple for circumcision (boys) and blessings.

Remember the story of John the Baptist's birth and dedication. He was supposed to be called John, but everyone said he should be named Zechariah, after his father. Zechariah had been struck mute until he named his son John. At the day of dedication, he named him John and he could speak again. John means "the Lord is a gracious giver." Zechariah and Elizabeth were old and had never been able to have children. Now the Lord gave them a child who was to be the forerunner to the Messiah and every time they called his name, they would be reminded that the Lord is a gracious giver.

And every time he preached about the coming Messiah, the Redeemer, it would be the man named after God's generosity and graciousness that would be proclaiming the arrival of the greatest Gift.

And then there's Naomi. Naomi was married to a man and they had two sons. The two sons married women named Orpah and Ruth. Naomi's husband and two sons died, leaving her with two daughters-in-law who were still young. "Go back home," she told them, "find husbands

and settle down." They both refused to leave her. Eventually she convinced Orpah to go, but Ruth refused and pledged to stay with Naomi even to death. So Naomi and Ruth moved to Bethlehem. When they entered, people asked, "Is that Naomi?"

Rth 1:20-21-- *20 "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 21 I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."*

After that, Naomi was referred to as Mara.

I'm just kidding. She was still Naomi.

"Naomi! Is that you?!"

"Don't call me Naomi. The Lord had made my life hard. Call me Mara."

"Sure thing, Naomi."

"It's Mara."

"Sorry, Naomi."

Sometimes we are so stuck in our misery that we identify ourselves by our trouble and grief. Mara means *bitter*. But the people who knew her didn't refer to her by her grief and misery. They referred to her by who she really was: Naomi. Naomi means *pleasant*. By calling her by

her known name, by identifying her with the blessings of her life, by refusing to completely re-identify her by her current circumstances, people were telling her that her current life will not be her permanent state.

Sometimes we need people to remind us who we really are. Even when something hurts us deeply and it is all we can see at the moment, we need friends and family to speak our reality back to us. Although we may be changed profoundly by a diagnosis, a trauma or a loss, we do not need to forever change our identity because of that pain. We may need people that know us and love us to speak to us and to continue to identify us apart from our present hurt.

This is how we regain hope. It gives our hurt a properly-sized place in the grand scheme of our lives. It contains it to an appropriate vessel in the attic of our experience. It's real, it has a place and it should not be forgotten. We will be changed, but it does not need to rule us. That is the Lord's place. Yes, the Lord afflicts pain or allows pain and he acknowledges our suffering and grief, but he also provides hope, healing, restoration, redemption, and he uses other people to bring it.

Bring the healing to others or allow yourself to be healed, whatever the case may be for now. But don't demand a name change in the middle of your pain. I'm not calling you by your name and no one else should either.

Thank you, Lord for calling me your own. Help me to put the pain in my life into its proper place. Do not let me be overwhelmed by it and don't let me identify myself by it. Bring me people who will remind me who I really am and send me to others who need to be reminded. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

A Gospel For Everyone

Romans 1:14-15

Have you ever been considered a hopeless case? I'm a hopeless case in many things. There is nothing anyone can do to make me great at complex math. When I took basic statistics, for example, I dropped the class twice and when I had to take the third time I spent a minimum of three hours a day doing exercises and homework for that one class and still eeked out with a 72. Fortunately I only had to take it as a prerequisite so I could take the graduate research class, so it didn't affect my GPA. Math is not my strong suit. Basic math, sure, but I have mixed emotions for scientists and engineers. On the one hand, serious respect; on the other, "Better you than me."

Language is not a problem for me. And rhythm. It was Louis Armstrong, the legendary jazz musician, who was once asked to define rhythm. He said, "If you got it, you don't need a definition and if you don't got it, no definition is gonna help."

Rom 1:14-15 -- *14 I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. 15 That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.*

Paul, here, is addressing the Roman people, saying, whether you are in a position to understand the good news of Jesus Christ or not, to believe in it or not, and to receive it or not, my role is exactly the same, and I'm excited to do it: to preach the gospel to you so that, whether Jew or Greek, Roman citizen or not, wise enough to understand

and accept it or foolish enough not to, you will have heard it and been given the opportunity to respond.

I wonder if Paul is so eager not only because of the importance of the Gospel and his love and gratitude to God for saving him, but also because he was the last person anyone would have believed would come to faith in Jesus.

Paul would have been classified as a hopeless case. Even after word got back to the apostles in Jerusalem that he had been converted and was now preaching, and they were asked to let him join them, they initially said no. "Saul?" they asked. "Of Tarsus?" I can almost hear them snicker in disbelief. "I don't think so." But Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them his story and how he had been preaching fearlessly in Damascus, even how the Grecian Jews had tried to kill him because of his preaching. When the apostles heard this they accepted him and sent him out to continue preaching. This is all in Acts 9.

So, who do you see as hopeless? Is there anyone you think the Lord cannot reach? We sometimes will not speak of Jesus to those who are resistant or maybe aggressively hostile to the faith, but we are called to take the Gospel to all. We may be surprised at who God calls.

Lord, give me your eyes and heart for people, that I will be bold and compassionate in proclaiming your grace, not just to those I think are open to it, but to everyone, knowing you can break even the hardest of hearts, just like you did for me. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

He Ain't Heavy

Galatians 6:2

*"Bear one another's burdens,
and so fulfill the law of Christ."*

Those of us of a certain chronological advancement (i.e.- us older folks) will recognize the familiar title and lyrics of the late sixties song made popular by The Hollies, "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother."

Most don't realize that the sentiment or inspiration for this phrase came from a book of parables of Jesus written by James Wells, a leader in the United Free Church of Scotland in 1884.

In his book, Wells told the story of little Scottish lass who was seen carrying a rather big baby boy. Someone saw her and said to her; "Surely you need to rest, carrying such a big boy like that."

Her reply of surprise came in her Scottish brogue;

"He's na heavy, He's mi brither."

Through the years some version of that phrase has been used in various forms such as the slogan for the *Boys Town* children's home founded by Father Flannagan in Omaha, Nebraska in 1917.

While we have no way of knowing, one wonders if James Wells drew inspiration for his story from the words of the Apostle Paul in Galatians 6:2:

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

As the church, the body of believers, we have both the responsibility... and privilege of *"bearing one another's burdens."*

And who doesn't have burdens from time to time?

We have probably all heard the phrase: *"A burden shared is a burden halved."*

We have to be willing to not only share in *others* burdens, but also share *our* burdens. But sadly, sometimes we may just want to keep our burdens all to ourselves;

"This is my burden, and I'm not sharing it. I'm just going to have my own little pity party here and you're not invited."

The other half of that verse is:

"...and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Just what is the *"law of Christ?"*

In Matthew chapter 22:36 Jesus was asked by the religious leaders:

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

So Jesus sums it all up pretty succinctly; "Love God, Love others."

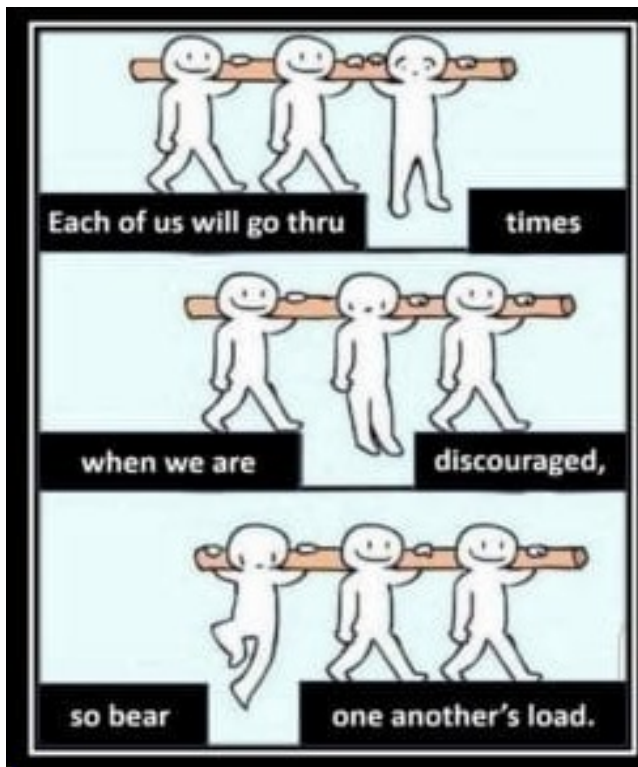
Now I'm sure we have all heard sermons or read commentaries on the "just who is my neighbor" part of that passage, and in understanding the whole "Good Samaritan" thing recorded in Luke's Gospel we know that loving our *"neighbor"* is not just a suggestion.

But have you ever noticed or considered the “*as yourself*” part of that verse?

Jesus is not only affirming a pretty well known truth; most folks don’t have a problem loving themselves, but He is also saying; it’s OK to love yourself, just as long as you love your “neighbor” also.

Part of loving ourselves may be recognizing our own sense of vulnerability as we allow others to help us bear *our* burdens.

When Paul instruct us to “*bear one another’s burdens*” we need to realize that at some point each of us will be the one suspended over the chasm.



-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Contempt for Kindness

Romans 2:2-4

We're generally not good with judgment. What I mean is that as a rule we're not very good at giving fair and honest judgment about things that are good and right.

The modern American church has a history of kicking hard against abortion and homosexuality. Why is that? One scholar I recently read said that the church chose sins that did not permeate their ranks as the sins to speak out against. While, yes, pastors and believers will speak against all sins, when it comes to the ones that bring a big fight, we tend to choose the ones that we ourselves are not ensnared by.

[Rom 2:2-4-- *2 Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. 3 So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? 4 Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*

God is fair and just in his judgments; we are not. We tend to get outraged by the sins that we don't grasp. If we cannot understand how someone would have an attraction for someone of the same sex or if we cannot fathom seeing baby as something to do away with, how could anyone see it any differently? It can just be

absolutely repulsive, therefore easy to denounce and to judge as evil.

But what about gossip and slander? What about resentment, bitterness, greed, envy, arrogance? Or a lack of love, mercy and compassion? These are all listed in Romans 1, the beginning of the conversation in Romans 2. The point is not that we should not denounce sin, but rather that we should denounce all sin, know that God is going to judge all sin, ours included, and that it is God's righteous judgment, flowing from truth, that will come, not our imbalanced and partial judgment.

But why does God wait? Because he's kind. In v4 Paul writes, "God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance."

We live in a day where harsh judgment runs rampant and it is easy to respond in kind. But there is a lot we don't know about others. If God's kindness is intended to lead us to repentance, then we are to display that kindness to lead others to that same repentance. If we are praying for others to come to Christ, are showing them kindness and are speaking the truth of God, they are more likely to come to repentance. Let us not show contempt for God's kindness and let us show enough kindness that we ourselves are not contemptible either.

Thank you, Lord, for your kindness and patience toward me. Give me the same heart of patience and kindness toward those who do not know you, that they will come to repentance. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Thank you notes

1 Thess 1:2-3

Since I've always lived in the South I'm not sure if thank you notes are specifically a southern thing or if they are expected everywhere. I'm sure they are everywhere but in the South they are a big deal. I'll be honest. I've never been great at thank you notes. I'm happy to say thank you, but writing a note to reinforce it is not a natural response, no matter how many times I was told to do it growing up. Graduation days, birthdays, our wedding, and various gifts through the years have all required thank you notes. I know some people have been offended when I have either failed or forgotten to send a thank you note.

And some people say, "The fact that you are using what I gave you is thanks enough." I remember the astronaut pen on Seinfeld. One time Jerry was using a nice pen and one of his father's friends, Jack, commented on it. "It's an astronaut pen," Jerry explained. "It writes at any angle." Jack was impressed so Jerry gave it to him. Every time Jerry saw him for the rest of the series (about 3 more years) Jack would pull the pen out and say, "I've still got the pen."

1Th 1:2-3-- *We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Do we view other believers as gifts from God? And how do we view their work in ministry? How often do we send God a thank you for the other believers we know?

I've been in ministry a long time and I know that there are a lot of believers who have done a lot to grow the kingdom. They have done things I could not do or even didn't do, but they did. They ask what they can do to help or they just do the stuff that someone has to do, even without asking about it.

We see people cleaning the church building, mowing grass and pulling weeds, organizing supply closets, cooking meals for others, giving people rides, making visits running seasonal emphases, teaching classes and even focusing on prayer when they are home alone.

Prayers are thank you notes to God. We thank people who do these things in ministry and we should, so thank you to everyone who serves and gives and sacrifices. But thanks especially to God for his gift of others. Take some time to thank the Lord for the people you know, believers or not, that make your life better and easier, that care for you and fill a need. Thank the Lord for them by name if you can and as they pop into your head through the day, send God another quick thank you note.

Thank you, Lord, for those who make our lives better. Thank you for creating us for relationships and then gifting us with other people. Help me be wise in the way I care for those gifts. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

The Glory of God

Psalm 19:1

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”

Hopefully, by the time you read this, I will have already had a successful opening day of the 20-21 Duck Season.

Long before Phil Robertson, the “Duck Commander,” or the popular syndicated TV show “Duck Dynasty” became a household fascination, I was already passionately engaged in the pursuit of waterfowl. I can remember getting up extra early during hunting season and paddling the boat out across the lake where I grew up, just in the hopes of getting a shot at a mallard or wood duck before having to leave for school.

I have seen many mornings and duck seasons since then.

The boats have gotten a little bigger and I don’t even have to paddle anymore; there’s an outboard motor now. (I probably should say; I don’t have to paddle... most of the time...)

The guns have gotten more elaborate than the single shot 12 gauge that my brother gave me for Christmas the year of my 12th birthday. (I still have and cherish that gun)

And the hunting clothes are no longer whatever I could dig out of the cedar closet that contained my Dads old army uniforms and fatigues. I have coats and boots that actually keep me warm...and dry now!

But one thing that has not changed over all of these years is the magnificent beauty of God’s creation.

I can not even begin to number the sunrises that I have been blessed to experience, peering over the bushes of the duck blind as God just outdoes Himself time after time with portraits of incredible beauty painted on His own heavenly canvas.

Some of you may have noticed that many of the background images that I use for the songs for our Power Point slides are sunrise scenes. Most of these were photos taken from the duck blind.

As I look out onto each one of these glorious sunrises I can proclaim with the prophet;

“The faithful love of the Lord never ends!

His mercies never cease.

Great is his faithfulness;

his mercies begin afresh each morning.”

(Lamentations 3:22-23)

God’s mercy, faithfulness and love are renewed to us each day just as surely as the sun rises every morning.

I don’t know if we will have a successful duck season this year - if we will actually get the chance to shoot some ducks. But I do know this - as I once again watch that sun come up over the horizon. I know that once again;

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

This we proclaim

1 John 1:1

People who don't want to believe the Bible or believe in the God the Bible describes will often point to the stories as hearsay. First, they don't understand textual criticism. Second, the Bible is not filled with secondhand accounts and rumors some guy heard from another guy who has a cousin whose girlfriend overheard the leper talking about how Jesus had healed him.

Textual criticism focuses on determining the origin of a text and the accuracy of its translation. Part of this is language and part is tracking down the earliest copies. In historical texts we don't often have the originals, but we go back to the earliest available copies. In the Bible we have copies that are within 20 years after the event. That seems like a long time, but it isn't, given that some ancient events are not recorded for a couple hundred years.

1 John 1:1-- *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.*

John, here, says, "This isn't rumor we're telling you. We were there. This is the work and teaching of a Jesus we walked with, lived with, heard and hugged." It's like signing an affidavit that what you are saying is true and you were there to see it. That's what makes it reliable.

You have a story to tell, too. What makes Jesus believable to you? What makes him worth telling others about? I hope if you've been a Christian for at least a little while you have plenty of stories of how Jesus has changes your life, changed your thinking, begun making you a different person, helped you overcome struggles and healed you of some past wounds.

We are always being changed into the image of Christ, looking more and more like him as we go. What will make the difference to others is if they can come to know the difference in you. Yes you can talk about the truth and reliability of Scripture, but it is your own story that will make the work of Jesus real to others enough that they will want to follow him, too.

John spoke of a Jesus he knew, one he walked with, one he saw do great things and heard his voice personally. But that should be you, too. That's what you talk about. Yes, get to know the Word. Read it, study it, pray through it and obey it; but it is the change in you that will help others know that following Jesus made the difference and continues to.

Proclaim what you have seen, heard, and walked through, not only what you've read.

Thank you, Lord, for a personal Jesus. Thank you that he does not just live in ancient stories, but lives today, even in me. Give me a compassionate boldness to speak about who He is and about what he's done in me, that others may come to follow him. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Whatever happens

Philippians 1:27-30

Everybody believes in something. Their faith rests somewhere. They believe in the God of the Bible, the Koran, the book of Mormon; a god of their own making. They place their faith in science, the goodness of man or their own rational thinking and good judgment.

But what do you believe in? In the New Testament the word believe is the Greek word *pisteuo* (pronounced *pe-styu-o*), which means to trust or to commit to. When we talk about believing in God or in Christ, we mean not that we agree that he exists, but that we are committed to Jesus.

In the standard wedding vow we state something along the lines of "for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, I will stay with you forever." Commitment doesn't mean anything when everything is good. When there's no stress, no lingering health issues, no financial strain, no sacrifice or self-denial required, then it is easy to stay together. The vow is made so that when things get bad and are hard, when you might want to walk away, you have already told each other you will stick it out.

Phi 1:27-30-- *27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel 28 without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a*

sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved--and that by God. 29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, 30 since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Here's an interesting thought: according to v28, when you stand firm, without fear of the opposition that you face, it will be evidence TO THEM that God WILL save you, but that they will not. Your willingness to follow through on your commitment in hardship will show others what it means to be a follower of Christ. It is not compromise and softening to the world that will bring others to Christ, but is firm commitment no matter what, that makes Christianity more appealing and draws a line in the sand.

And then Paul says, "It has been GRANTED to you to suffer for him." The word grant implies a positive offer. It is a blessing from God when we are allowed to suffer for our commitment to Christ."

As we look at what is going on around us, we may feel anxiety or worry at what that means for us as Christians. Our response is simple, though not easy: "Whatever happens, I will stand firm. I am committed to the Lord who has been committed to me."

Thank you, Lord for dying for me and giving me new life. Help me live for you, whatever happens. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

I'm Full

Psalm 63:4-5

*"I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you."*

Well... by now most of us have had our fill of turkey and all the fixin's. And no doubt at some point, someone made the statement; "I'm so full I couldn't eat another bite." (Just before having that second... or third... piece of pumpkin pie.)

We are blessed to live in a country where we can be;

"...fully satisfied as with the richest of foods."

Or, as *The Message* paraphrases these verses;

*"I bless you every time I take a breath;
My arms wave like banners of praise to you.
I eat my fill of prime rib and gravy;
I smack my lips. It's time to shout praises!"*

Or this week we might make our own "paraphrase;"

"I eat my fill of turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, butterbeans and corn, sweet potato casserole, green beans and ham, pumpkin pie... apple pie..."

But if we look at the actual wording of verse 4 and 5, the Psalmist is not talking about being filled with a turkey induced tryptophan coma.

I like the way the NLT translates these verses;

*"I will praise you as long as I live,
lifting up my hands to you in prayer.
You satisfy me more than the richest feast.
I will praise you with songs of joy."*

The Psalmist is rejoicing and praising God because it is God Himself who satisfies;

***"You** satisfy me more than the richest feast."*

The realization that true satisfaction, true fulfillment comes from God caused the Psalmist to burst forth in praise. Our response should be the same.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesian believers prayed for them that;

"...you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

(Ephesians 3:17-19)

During this season of Thanksgiving may we all be aware of our many blessings and express our gratitude with praise.

As we are no doubt "*...fully satisfied as with the richest of foods,*" may we also seek to grasp;

"...how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and

"...be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Favor for the remnant

Ezra 1:1-4

One of the things the nations of Israel and Judah faced was the change of ruling empires under which they were often held captive. Each empire had its own way of handling those whom they captured. Some said, "Stay here. Don't cause trouble and everything will be fine. This is how Rome and Assyria ruled. They took the resources of nations for their own use, but generally didn't send people away. They thought, 'If the people are content they will be less likely to rebel.' When the people rebelled, however, they were shown a terrible lesson, sometimes killed horribly or enslaved. Others, like Babylon, brought captors to Babylon to train their best and brightest in the ways of the Babylonian thought, culture and language, in the hopes that it would spread and be passed down several generations so Babylon would live on.

Then there are the Persians. The Persians paid attention to various religious thoughts and teachings to see where the world was headed and how they could be favored by it. Daniel, having been captured by the Babylonians as a boy, spent nearly 70 years studying Scripture and praying, all the while knowing that Judah would soon be set free because God keeps his promises. Sure enough, after 70 years, Babylon fell to the Persians and a new king sat on the throne: Cyrus.

Because the Medes and Persians respected religion and Daniel was well-respected, he kept his role as an advisor

under the new king. Now in his mid-eighties, Daniel spoke with the new king, gained his favor and shared prophecy. One prophecy likely took the king by surprise. Written 150 years before he sat on the throne, Daniel showed him a Scripture: *This is what the LORD says-- your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, the Maker of all things, who stretches out the heavens, who spreads out the earth by myself, ... who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid" ' (Isaiah 44:24-28).*

Imagine Cyrus' shock at seeing his own name in the ancient scrolls! That he is put here to be an instrument of God for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem!

Ezr 1:1-4-- *1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: 2 "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: " 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. 3 Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. 4 And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.' "*

As Ezra 1 goes on to describe, although everyone was happy to donate to the return and rebuilding, not everyone was willing to return. They had become used to their life in Babylon. Their grandparents had come here, after all. Maybe their children were born here, but to this generation, Babylon was all they knew. Risking it all to go to Judah did not sound appealing. So they stayed. "Good for you for going!" they would say, "Have a safe trip. I packed a travel basket for you."

Our nation is sitting at a strange time right now, not knowing what the immediate future will look like. What will a new administration mean for me, my family, my finances, my faith practice, my job. Combine a new president, the local COVID restrictions, new school schedules, a maybe-vaccine, and people who yell "You're a nazi!" one minute, now saying "we need to unify" and we can be a boiling, roiling stew of emotions.

Why this passage today, then?

Because Cyrus wasn't Jewish. Read through Ezra 1 and see how said "any of his (meaning God's) people" and "may their God be with them." Not "our" God, "their" God. He admitted that God wasn't his God, his Lord, but that he was willing to recognize their faith in that God. And he was willing to recognize the power and authority of God, even if not personally in his own morality or faith.

We are commanded to pray for our leaders (1 Tim. 2:1-4) and to submit to them as established by God (Rom. 13:1). I may not have chosen the leaders that are in the White House, the Congress, the Supreme Court, the Governor's mansion, the state house and senate, or the

local boards. But God did. Why and how he did may not make any more sense to me than why he allowed me to be a husband and father or a pastor. But he did. When we pray for our leaders, we are saying several things:

1. We are thankful that a good God is doing what he needs to do, even if we don't get it or it is different than what we would do.
2. We recognize that their tasks are difficult and they need God's help to fulfill them well.
3. We admit our own weakness in attitude and behavior, thinking we can do their jobs better. And it puts us in a position of asking for the Lord's help for ourselves.
4. We think of our leaders as spiritual people fighting spiritual battles and ask the Lord's blessing of salvation for them.
5. It aligns our heart to God's to see our leaders and our "enemies" with love.

Let us not lose heart and think the worst is unfolding. God has used a remnant before and he can do so again. But we cannot stay settled in Babylon. Let us examine ourselves and see if we are too comfortable where we are. We must pack up as part of that remnant that prays and moves and faces challenges as one who says, "That God you're speaking of is MY God and I am one of HIS people." There is rebuilding to do.

Thank you, Lord, for putting the right leaders in place. We ask that you guide them and soften them to hear from you and to decide wisely. Give us hearts of compassion to pray, unify and follow you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Throwing Stones

John 8:7

“When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

What kid, or adult for that matter, doesn't like to throw stones. You know, to pick up a rock and see just how far you can chuck it. Or perhaps find that perfect smooth, round river rock and skip it across the water.

There is a local 7-11 store that has some stone landscaped areas with a sign planted right in front; “do not throw the rocks.”

I'm guessing that the sign would not have been put there if someone had not already succumbed to the temptation to grab one of those little gems and give it a toss.

And don't even get me started on slingshots...

In the Bible days, throwing stones... stoning... had a much different connotation. Stoning, as harsh and cruel as it seems (and is) was the prescribed form of capital punishment in Old Testament Israel. Though it was indeed a harsh form of punishment, it required the involvement of the entire community in executing the judgement.

And we know that the practice was still in use during the New Testament times. Acts 7 records the “Stoning of Stephen” by the Jewish religious leaders.

In John 8, as Jesus begins teaching the people in the temple area, the story of a woman caught in the act of adultery is presented.

When the Pharisees bring this woman and thrust her before Jesus, it is not to determine guilt or innocence, (she was after all “*caught in the act*”) or even to administer punishment.

The Pharisees, knowing Jesus' teachings on forgiveness (Matthew 6) were trying to trap Him. Would Jesus validate, and perhaps even participate in the harsh capital punishment prescribed by the Law, or would He proclaim some other, more lenient punishment, and then place Himself in contradiction to the Law?

““Teacher,” they said to him, “this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” They asked this to trap him, in order that they might have evidence to accuse him.” (John 8:4-6)

No doubt, the Pharisees (once again) thought that “they had Him this time!” But they could not foresee the divine wisdom that Jesus would soon present.

John records that initially Jesus did not even respond to the accusing demands for an answer. He simply started writing something... no one really knows what... in the dust or dirt of the temple area.

As they continued to pester Him, Jesus stands up.

Perhaps as He was stooped over they couldn't see what He had been writing. But now as He rises, without condemning anyone, He says;

"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

"...and one by one, her accusers turned to run... they had to get away from those lines drawn in the sand."

The Pharisees had their eyes on the woman, and on Jesus, having already judged and condemned them both in their own minds and hearts. Until confronted with Jesus' "lines in the sand" they refused to look inward at their own faults.

I'm quite sure this story was not included in God's Word as just another example of how Jesus slam dunked the Pharisees... again...

How often are we, like the Pharisees, looking around at everyone but our own selves? How often do focus on, or blame others, without ever looking inward and seeing the truth about ourselves.

There is the old saying; "Those who live in glass houses, should not throw rocks."

The reality is; we all live in glass houses.

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

Driving or Drifting?

Hebrews 2:1

Self-driving cars are on the way. We have moved from horseless carriages to gasoline engines to engines with computer chips to whole computer systems to corrective stopping and steering and now there are actual self-driving cars. This is not a euphemism for a car that has an advanced cruise control. Cruise control lets you lock in the speed, but you still have to drive. Self-driving cars don't need a person behind the wheel at all. From starting up to driving and parking itself, it is 100% automated.

Self-driving cars use three forms of technology to operate. First, they use sensors. They use them for blind-spot monitoring, collision warning, radar, ultrasonic and more. Second, they use IoT connection ("Internet of Things", simply put, is a connection of everything in the world and connecting them to the internet. Most devices are moving in this direction, including watches and refrigerators). Using IoT the car tracks weather, road conditions, traffic patterns, etc. Third they use software algorithms to bring it all together and to avoid one thing: human error. Human error in driving causes 90% of auto accidents. The other 10% are mechanical or other issues.

In the same way, many of the struggles we have with our faith and growth is from the same thing: inattentiveness. We just aren't paying attention to where we're going and we kind of move along by habit or on autopilot. Have you

ever been driving and next thing you know you're at your destination? Have you ever taken a wrong turn out of habit, going home or to a usual spot when you're supposed to be going somewhere else? I have. Just this week, in fact.

Heb 2:1-- *We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.*

It is so easy for us to drift, isn't it? It's easy to gradually slide away from our desired course. In street racing, drifting is a strategy for taking turns; it has become a competitive sport in itself and it's fun to watch. Until it goes wrong. Then it's a mess.

The writer of Hebrews is telling us that the Word of God that we have been given is very specific and that we must constantly pay attention to it and to correct our course by it. Our spiritual growth, our faith, our morality, cannot drive itself. We have to be the ones steering. A GPS is nice. It can give direction, but my app will not take the wheel from me and make me turn. God doesn't do that either. He directs us where to go and calls for correction, but we have to be awake and attentive and willing to listen. Otherwise we'll drift and eventually ask, "How did I get here? This isn't where I want to be."

Thank you, Lord, giving us your Word. Thank you for your involvement in my life to direct and correct me. Help me to trust your directions and to stay always alert and attentive so I don't drift. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

What time is it?

Ecclesiastes 3

America was doing great! We were tired of war and were back up on our feet after victory and sacrifice during the Great War. The economy had recovered after the Depression and families were doing well.

Not so much in Europe. We watched as Germany moved through the continent and nations surrendered after brief sieges. The German tactic of Blitzkrieg was one that was difficult to defend against. A wave of aircraft followed by a wave of fast-moving armored vehicles and tanks followed by well-trained soldiers doped with methamphetamines, blew through the Scandinavian countries, France, the Alpine countries and Eastern Europe while America said, "We'll support you with resources, but we will not fight."

There were mixed feelings in the US now. Some said we must go, others said we must not.

And then there was the sneak attack. December 7, 1941 at 7:55am. President Roosevelt called it "a date which will live in infamy." We are familiar with the importance of today, the anniversary of the bombing attack on our Naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Suddenly we were at war, whether we wanted to be or not. And so we signed up to fight. We built our army, strengthened our resources. We showed that Admiral Yamamoto of Japan was correct when he said after the

attack, "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with terrible resolve."

Ecc 3:1, 8-- *1 To every [thing there is] a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: ... 8 A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.*

We love our peace, don't we? We love to avoid a fight. Bad news, though: we are under attack. We are in daily spiritual battles whether we like it or not. And Satan loves a sneak attack. We can easily be caught off-guard, but we are told in **1 Cor 16:13**, *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.*

What time is it? It's time to fight! No more being attacked with your back turned. No more just hoping for the best. We are to fight on our knees as prayer warriors for ourselves, our families, our churches and our nations. We are to fight on our feet as we proclaim the truth, driving light into the darkness. We are to fight as we go forward.

There is much to do and there is much opposition to our work. Follow the call and fight the fight. As Winston Churchill said, "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never-- in nothing, great or small, large or petty."

Thank you, Lord, for calling us to fight for peace. Help me to know when to stand and when to kneel. Help me to know times for peace and times to fight, that your kingdom may grow and that I may stand. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Where Is Your Treasure Buried?

Matthew 6:19-21

Treasure hunters continue to search for Blackbeard's Treasure. The problem is, no one really knows where to look. It is believed to be either buried or lost somewhere between the coast of North Carolina and the Caribbean. Supposedly, the night before Blackbeard was killed, some of his crew ask their captain if his wife knew where the loot was hidden should he fall in battle. Blackbeard replied that nobody but himself and the devil, knew where it was, and the longest liver should take all. Well, one thing for sure, Blackbeard didn't take his treasure with him when he died. In fact, he entered eternity flat broke!

It has been said that your heart will always follow your treasure!

Q ... So where is your treasure buried?

Matthew 6:19-21 (NLT) ... "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty, and where thieves break in and steal. [20] Store your treasures in heaven, where they will never become moth-eaten or rusty and where they will be safe from thieves. [21] Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be."

Much has been written about David Livingstone, the medical missionary to Africa. He lived most of his life serving and ministering to the needy village people of Africa. Eventually, Livingstone contracted malaria and died from a number of medical complications. After his death, and because he was so loved by the villagers he served, they removed his heart from his body and buried it under a tall Mvula tree. The reason was quite simple ... they wanted his heart to be near the people he loved so

much. So his heart was buried there in Africa and his body was shipped back to London to be buried at Westminster Abbey.

As you can see in Scripture, Jesus said ... ***"Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be."***

Kelly Bullard ... *Our most treasured possessions and our deepest desires are inseparable.*

Q ... So, if your heart were to be buried in the place you love the most, where would it rest?

... on your job ... your farm ... in your car or truck ... in the river ...
... the ocean ... on the golf course ... at your local bank ... in your garage with all your possessions?

Q ... Have you checked lately to see if your treasures are on earth or in heaven?

Dr. William Rice ... *God does not call us to poverty. He calls us to great wealth. But to be truly rich we need to open our eyes to where the real treasure is. Real treasure isn't found on earth. Real treasure is not found in the abundance of possessions and accumulated cash. Real treasure is in heaven, and God invites us to lay up treasure there.*

So God encourages each of us to set our hearts and affections on the things of heaven ... and literally on God. These are things that have eternal value and significance. It has been said all that really matters in this life are God, His Word, and the souls of people.

I hope you will consider investing your time, talent and treasure in these eternal things. For if you do, your life will find eternal significance and the amazing reward of God.

Eagerly Waiting

Philippians 3:20

“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,”

We have probably all seen an amusing list of “oxymorons” at some time in the past. You know, words that are put next to each other that seem to be opposite in definition. At least that’s my definition of an oxymoron.

The actual dictionary definition of oxymoron to me is clearly confusing: “Oxymoron;” - *a figure of speech by which a locution produces an incongruous, seemingly self-contradictory effect.*

See what I mean - clearly confusing.

Here is a list of just a few oxymorons:

- found missing
- open secret
- small crowd
- act naturally
- pretty ugly
- only choice
- exact estimate
- jumbo shrimp

...and on and on they go...

But of course we could not forget this most generally distinctive one that is now so popularly disliked;

“Social distancing.”

(Which of course goes right along with the granddaddy of them all... Government Intelligence.)

In his letter to the Philippian believers the Apostle Paul encourages them, and us, to follow his example and realize that our ultimate home, our eternal citizenship is not this world but in heaven with our Savior.

Yet while we remain in this world we are to “*eagerly await*” our Savior. Kind of sounds almost exactly like one of those oxymorons. Usually we might expect to hear something like; “*patiently waiting*” or “*calmly waiting.*” (Unless of course you talking about most any experience at the DMV)

As we wait on the return of our Savior to take us to that eternal heavenly home, it is important that we remain eager. We need to not only eagerly and expectantly await and look for that return, but we must also eagerly carry out the purposes and plans He has for us while we remain here on this earth.

We need to be eager to share the Gospel message of our Savior. We need to be eager to help and love our fellowman. We should be eager to spend time with God in His Word and in prayer. We must be willing to serve Him in any capacity.

“Father, help us to stay eager as we serve You and share the message of Your love for us all through Jesus Christ”

- Pastor Ronnie Bunch

The craftsman

Ephesians 2:10

You can get almost anything custom made now: doors and windows, car parts, furniture, whatever. People invent things out of necessity and then find a way to have it custom made. A friend of mine was always trying to tie things down in the bed of his pickup truck, but had a hard time with the placement of tie downs. Or he would get a truck cover and couldn't use them. Or the bed liner would cover them up.

What did he do? He invented a tie down set that clamped onto the bed rails and could be moved easily. I used to help him package thousands of them for him to drive to Walmart stores in Florida. People wanted what he had invented. They had a specific need and he created a specific item for it and had someone set a mold to make them and then someone else created packaging and we had to package them exactly right for them to fit. As we worked in his garage he gave each of us a package so we could make sure we were packing them correctly.

Did you realize that you are custom-made, too?

Eph 2:10--*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Have you ever considered that we ask the wrong question sometimes about that? We sometimes ask,

"What does God have for me?" According to Eph. 2:10 maybe we should be asking, "What has God created me to do?"

If we look at this verse it sounds like God already has work for us, but he has to shape us and mold us to be able to do what he has already prepared ahead of time.

My father was a woodworker, as a hobby not a profession. He did okay for a while. When he retired, though, he got a Shopsmith. This is a woodworking system that allows for precision work. He went to classes and earned badges to become a master woodworker. He did beautiful work and he loved doing it.

The key was to start out not with raw wood, but with a purpose for it. He would say, "I'm building a display case that I can stain dark. What do I need to make that happen?" From there he would get the right raw materials and custom cut glass, choose the best hardware. He would glue the wood together and cut it, round it out, add detail. He would stain it, seal it, put everything together, and inspect it.

Then he would use it. Everything he made was designed for a purpose. It was custom made for a reason.

Just like you.

Thank you, Lord, for customizing me. Thank you for having me in mind. Make me into whatever you need so I can fulfill your purpose for me. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

The Gift Of Hope

Luke 2:10

I mentioned in my Sunday message that so many people today see the world as a very scary place to live! Fear can come from so many different directions. Today, people are afraid of catching Covid and dying ... (over 300 thousand have been reported to have died as a result of the virus). Some are afraid that they are going to loose their businesses ... (as many as half of our small businesses will never open back up). Now you have people who are afraid to take the new Covid vaccine. Life is tough and sometimes tragic! Death is a real possibility. That is bad news. But the worst news of all is that we are all sinners and our sin separates us from God. Oh how good it is to get Good News that can trump our bad news.

Luke 2:8-11 (NLT) ... *“That night some shepherds were in the fields outside the village, guarding their flocks of sheep. [9] Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terribly frightened, [10] but the angel reassured them. ‘Don't be afraid!’ he said. ‘**I bring you good news of great joy for everyone!**’ [11] The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!’”*

Our text reveals three important elements that are key insights of this Good News:

1. The first key element was the angel. God's angels were used quite often throughout the Old Testament to deliver messages from God to human beings. But of all the messages that angels delivered, no message was as significant as the one proclaimed by this angel on this particular night. It has been said that the value of the message of Good News

necessitated a valuable messenger.

2. The second key element was the audience. Just look at who God shared this message with first. Not a king or a politician, just a group of lowly shepherds. But that shouldn't surprise us, that's just the way God works. His ways are not our ways. The Bible is clear that the Chief Shepherd made His Good News of salvation known to common, ordinary shepherds. These shepherds are symbolic of each of us who are spiritually low and who are in desperate need of the good news that this angel brought for “all people.”

3. The last key element of this story is the announcement that was made. The angel announced good news. His words were meant to bring great joy, not fear. The plan of God to offer forgiveness and salvation for anyone, anywhere, was meant to bring about great joy and celebration. The angel used two adjectives ... “good and great” to describe God and His promise. God is a good God and He is a great God! He is also a God who gives us hope!

Jesus was the child that was given that night. He is the Son that God gave us. Jesus is our hope for eternity! In fact, He alone is the hope of the world. Remember our world needs real hope. Jesus is the hope they desperately need. Therefore, take the hope of Jesus out into the piece of world that you live in and encourage those who are struggling. And be amazed at how this gift of hope truly does change people's lives.

~~~~~  
*Lord Jesus, I am grateful that you are my gift of hope.  
Please help me to share my gift with others.  
In Jesus' name, Amen*

*Pastor Randy Green*



## God and Man

Isaiah 9:6

*“For unto us a Child is born,  
Unto us a Son is given;*

As we are now in the “Christmas Season,” and are approaching Christmas Day, the day in which we celebrate the coming of our Savior, we turn our attention to the birth of the infant Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah tells us that “a Child is *born...*”

Although we have all probably seen numerous Christmas pageants, musicals and movies depicting the birth of Jesus, there is actually very little information given to us in the gospels about that most blessed event.

Matthew gives the genealogy of Jesus through the line of Joseph, and the angel’s message of assurance to Joseph in chapter one. He then records the visit of the Magi in chapter two, followed by the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus into Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod.

The Gospel of Mark does not include the account of Jesus’ birth, but jumps right in with His baptism by John, affirmation by God the Father, and the beginning His earthly ministry.

The account given in the Gospel of Luke is no doubt the most familiar, and gives some detail regarding Jesus’ actual birth.

*“Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because*

*he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”*

(Luke 2:4-7)

Although we know that conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit as announced to Mary by the angel Gabriel was a miraculous event, the birth was just that... the birth of a child.

And even though “*there was no room for them at the inn*” (KJV), or “*no guest room available for them,*” (CSB) the reality is that for most women giving birth in first century Palestine there would have been no “*guest room.*” Certainly no maternity ward as we think of today. At best a mid-wife or family member assisting in the birth.

So... Jesus was *born*, just as babies have always been born. This reminds us of His humanity.

The Gospel of John tells us that;

*“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”*  
(John 1:14)

and that;

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*  
(John 1:1)

Jesus Christ, the Word that “*was with God*” and “*was God.*” The Divine, was “*born*” as a baby... a human.

But the prophet Isaiah also tells us that "*a Son is given.*" This speaks of His deity.

Again, from the Gospel of John;

*"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."*

Because of His love for lost humanity God "*gave*" His Son, not just to be "*born*" as an infant, a human, but to make "*His dwelling among us.*" To live a sinless life of perfection that he might fulfill the purpose for which He came into this world.

He "*gave himself for us to redeem us...*" (Titus 2:14)

At this Christmas season may we remember that the "*Child that is born*" is the "*Word that was with God and was God,*" and may we worship Him who was both fully God and fully man as our eternal Savior.

For;

*"Unto us a Son is given;"*

***-Pastor Ronnie Bunch***

# The STAR of Bethlehem

*Matthew 2, Luke 2*

By now you've heard the Christmas story. Probably multiple times; for some of you many, many times. And yet there is always something new to discover. One of the things that is always at issue is the visit of the Magi, or the wise men, at the birth of Jesus. In every nativity scene and in every re-telling of the Christmas story, the wise men, the three kings, are included. There they stand, big crowns, long robes, each holding a gift for the child King lying in the manger.

But then there arises the issue that they likely weren't there at all and in fact, arrived later. There are countless books and videos, articles and commentaries on who they were, where they came from and when they visited.

Briefly I want to say that in many ways these questions aren't easily answered. Luke and Matthew tell different parts of the story, neither of them clearly expressing an exact timeline.

**Matthew 2:9-11**--9 *After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh..*

The Magi saw the star, came to Jerusalem to ask about the child King and mentioned Bethlehem. He said to go find him and tell Herod where he was so he could worship him as well. Herod was a big, fat liar and wanted to kill him. The Magi didn't necessarily follow Herod's directions to go to Bethlehem, but they DID follow the star.

The star rested over the child's head, leading them to the house where he stayed, whether that was in Bethlehem or Nazareth. Scholars can't agree because it is unclear. It was sometime between 40 days and 2 years after Jesus was born and most agree that it was probably about a year and a half or so.

But it doesn't matter. The Magi aren't the stars of the story. Neither are Mary, Joseph, the shepherds or even the angels. The real STAR of Bethlehem is Jesus himself.

Dave Guzik says, "We see here three different responses to Jesus; one may say that all people respond in one of these three ways: Herod displayed an open hatred and hostility toward Jesus. The chief priests and the scribes were indifferent toward Jesus, all the while retaining their religious respectability. The wise men sought out Jesus and worshipped Him – even at great cost."

He is the one to follow, to seek, to worship and to bring our offerings to. Just like the Magi. If we are doing anything other than seeking the King, bowing before him and pointing others toward him, we're doing it wrong.

Angelus Selesius says,

"Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if He's not born in thee, thy soul is still forlorn."

*Thank you, Lord, for the way you put the Christmas story together. You didn't do it the way we would, but you did it much better! Thank you for showing us the way to Christ and leading us to worship him and to give him my life the way he has given his for me.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Where you belong

*Luke 2:1,4*

We usually look at verse 1 of Luke 2 as the sentence that sets the stage for WHY Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but we quickly move past it. No one ever really talks much about verse 1. Linus starts his monologue of the Christmas story in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* at Luke 2:1, but moves on just like the rest of us do.

Pairing verses 1 and 4, however, reminds us that the verse is important. The man who was ruling the Roman empire, Caesar Augustus, decided that Rome needed a census. Why? From the Roman perspective, it was to figure taxes. If they find out there are more people they can gain more taxes. From heaven's perspective, however, it's little more than a spoke in the wheel that moves history forward. Because of the census, Joseph and his betrothed trekked to Bethlehem, the family home, so that prophecy could be fulfilled and the Messiah could be born in Bethlehem.

**Luk 2:1, 4--** *1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ...  
4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.*

Notice the phrase "because he belonged to the house and line of David." Joseph and Mary belonged there. I love one of the definitions of *belong* from dictionary.com: "to be proper or due; be properly or appropriately placed, situated, etc."

Let's look at a couple more verses where the word "belong" is used:

**Rom 1:6--** *And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to **belong** to Jesus Christ.*

**Gal 5:24--** *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

Have you ever looked at yourself as **belonging to** Christ? The Scripture says you do. It says, according to the definition we just read that you are properly placed with Christ. You are situated with him. It is proper for you to be there.

I used to watch Tim Allen when he did stand-up comedy, which is how he got his show, Home Improvement. Tim really does love tools and cars and building things. One of the things he said was that people who are serious about their workshops have pegboards to hang their tools on. The ones that are die-hard about it have tape outlines. In other words, as you've heard before, "There's a place for everything and everything in its place."

This is what it means to belong to Christ. He has called you, set up good works for you to do, set you free from sin and death, gifted you for your purpose and he continues to prepare you day by day and to transform you into his image. All because you belong. His work in you is both evidence that you belong and is the reason you belong.

As you soak in the holidays and do your usual Christmas stuff, make sure to spend some time thanking the Lord for coming to get you and for reminding you that you belong to Christ.

As Ellen G. White says, "We do not belong to ourselves. But we have been purchased with a dear price. We have cost an immense sum, even the sufferings and death of the Son of God."

*Thank you, Lord, that you gave me a place to belong; not a club or organization, but at the feet of Jesus himself. Remind me daily that I am yours and there is no better place to be. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

## White As Snow

Isaiah 1:18

*“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord:  
though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be  
as white as snow;”*

I know... we were all hoping for, perhaps even “dreaming of,” a “White Christmas.” (Well, maybe not all...but at least some of us anyway.)

After waking up on Christmas morning it became obvious that it wasn’t going to happen again this year.

But it did get me thinking about snow in the Bible.

When we think of images of Bible geography, snow is not one that generally comes to mind, yet if you do a word search in BibleGateway or one of the other Bible apps you’ll find that it does appear a number of times.

The first time we see it is right after Moses has had his encounter with God in the burning bush. Moses does his “hem and haw” routine with God, being reluctant to follow God’s calling to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, so God gives him a couple of “signs” to use to convince Pharaoh. One of them is recorded in Exodus 4:6;

*“Then the Lord said, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” So Moses put his hand into his cloak, and when he took it out, the skin was leprous—it had become as white as snow.”*

Notice it doesn’t say; “as white as the desert sand,” or “as white as the salt from the Dead Sea.” Nope, it says;

*“as white as snow.”*

So evidently the readers (or hearers more likely) would have known about snow, and just how white it was. There are other references as well, such as;

*“Does the snow of Lebanon ever vanish from its rocky slopes?”*  
(Jeremiah 18:14)

The “*snow of Lebanon*” is referring to Mount Hermon. Mount Hermon’s summit straddles the border between Lebanon and Syria and it’s southern slopes are located in the present day Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Incidentally, it is the location of a modern Israeli snow-skiing area. (Who would have thought...?)

But the answer to the question;

*“Does the snow of Lebanon ever vanish from its rocky slopes?”* is no, there is snow pack visible on Mount Hermon pretty much year round.

So references and comparisons to the pure white nature of snow would have been well understood by the Old Testament reader/hearer.

The passage in Isaiah makes the comparison between this pure white image of snow, and “*scarlet*.”

*“though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be  
as white as snow;”*

One translation says it this way;

*“..though your sins are blood-red, they’ll be snow-white.”*

It's pretty natural to think of, maybe even wish for, snow at Christmastime. But blood... not so much.

Yet it was for the ultimate purpose of the shedding of His own blood in atonement for our sins that Jesus Christ came to earth as a human baby. The reason why we even have a Christmas.

Jesus Christ, the;

*"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world."*  
(John 1:9)

The *"True Light"* came to make a way for us to have a relationship with God through the forgiveness of our sins. Have them made *"as white as snow."*

And Jesus did this by His blood sacrifice.

*"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."*  
(1 John 1:7)

*"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ."*  
(Ephesians 2:13)

Yeah, it would have been nice to have a "White Christmas," and I for one would have been thankful for that. But I'm more thankful for the promise that because Jesus Christ, the True Light has come and shed His blood for me that;

*"...though your (my) sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;"*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

# Like us, but not like us

*Hebrews 4:14-16*

It's Christmas break for our family, which means, among other things, it's Marvel binge week. We take down our Christmas decorations, do some cleaning and get ready to go back to school, all while watching the Marvel movies in timeline order. We start with *Captain America* and go through to, this year, *Spiderman: Far From Home*.

One thing we realize about the Avengers is that they are like us, but not like us. They have been injected with super serum, exposed to radiation or experimentation or are just really good at what they do. In other words they are like us, but not like us.

Jesus isn't like us. And that's a good thing.

That said, he has faced the same things we face. For that, we should be grateful.

**Heb 4:14-16**--<sup>14</sup> *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* <sup>15</sup> *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet he did not sin.* <sup>16</sup> *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Most of the Marvel comics and movie hinge on the hero facing challenges and learning to overcome them in order to be better. They usually have someone to look to that helps them understand and grow. According to Hebrews 4, we have someone to look to as well: Jesus, our high priest.

He "has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet he did not sin." Why? Empathy. Empathy is defined as "vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts or attitudes of another." In other words, because Jesus has been tempted, he knows what it is like to be tempted. It is not some abstract concept, but is a very real, relatable experience he shares with us.

According to the writer of Hebrews, this is important and there are two things we need to do with that knowledge:

1. "Hold firmly to the faith we profess."
2. "Approach God's throne of grace with confidence."

We are often hesitant to approach God because of the kind of day or week (or year or years) we have had. Maybe we've been wandering around instead of walking the path the Lord has called us to. Maybe we've become ensnared in a sin or sins and feel unworthy to approach him.

Fortunately, we are told why we should approach with confidence: "so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

When you feel that you should not approach God's throne because you are deep in your sin, that is exactly the right time to approach him. You have a savior who knows the challenge of being tempted, he intercedes for you, you are commanded to approach God with confidence and are told that you will receive mercy and grace to help you.

What else are you looking for?

*Thank you, Lord, for resisting temptation always because sometimes I don't. Thank you for being not only approachable, but understanding. Give me the confidence I need to approach, and the mercy I need in my sin. Give me your grace to resist, to fight and to overcome sin. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Setting Your Spiritual Default

Psalm 128

**Psalm 128:1-6 (NLT)** ...*“How happy are those who fear the Lord—all who follow his ways! [2] You will enjoy the fruit of your labor. How happy you will be! How rich your life! [3] Your wife will be like a fruitful vine, flourishing within your home. And look at all those children! There they sit around your table as vigorous and healthy as young olive trees. [4] That is the Lord's reward for those who fear him.*

*[5] May the Lord continually bless you from Zion. May you see Jerusalem prosper as long as you live. [6] May you live to enjoy your grandchildren. And may Israel have quietness and peace.”*

Where do you turn when things get tough? We condition ourselves to turn a certain way and do certain things. What we turn to is critical. Trains are predictable. They have been designed to run on train tracks. A train engine is most effective and efficient pulling it's cars when it operates within the boundaries of the tracks on which it was created to run. But if the powerful engine jumps the tracks and moves outside the realm for which it was designed, then it plows into the ground and ceases to function. That's what we call a train wreck.

How often do we experience train wrecks in our lives? We were created by God to live within the guidelines of His holy Word and His Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, we sometimes forget that true happiness can only be discovered within those parameters. So we turn to other things, like people, money, drugs, sex, and other synthetic sources. But the true happiness we need cannot be experienced apart from God and His plan for our lives. His promise is that blessings will come to those who fear Him and that we can enjoy the fruit of our labor when we've walked in His ways. He will supply all your needs according to His glory through Christ Jesus. Praise God that as you submit to Him in every area of your

life,

*“You will enjoy the fruit of your labor. How happy you will be! How rich your life!”*

So as you prepare to start a new year, check the setting on your spiritual default. Make sure that you are set to turn to God when the difficult times come. Learn to turn to God for all you need and rest in His divine care and blessing.

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Father, Your Word is so clear as it tells me how I should live my life. Forgive me for the times when I depart from the guidelines that you have set in place for me. I understand that I can experience Your love and blessings by living in obedience to You. I also understand that I will never be happier than when I am trusting You and obeying Your will for my life. Thank You for Your promise and blessings. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A call to pray

1 Timothy 2:1-4

Someone once said, "The trouble with being a leader today is that you can't be sure whether people are following you or chasing you." That certainly seems to be the case in many instances. The last few days have seen tensions in our nation come to a boiling point. People are uneasy, anxious, angry, uncertain, terrified, saddened, and dismayed.

I have yet to hear anyone say they are excited or even delighted about where we are. Those who are more politically liberal are relieved to see an incoming president who aligns more with their thinking, but see the nation as being in peril. Those who are more politically conservative are distressed about the incoming administration and also see the nation as being in peril.

The rush on the nation's capital while congress was in session last week, brought opinions to light and forced many in leadership to speak publicly about what happened, how they feel about it and what should be done. Sadly, four people died as a result and over fifty more were wounded in the fray.

So what is our starting point to a response?

1Ti 2:1-4-- *1 I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people-- 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3 This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

Our starting point should not be a starting point, but should be a continuation of what should already be a habit: prayer.

Praying for our leadership can make a world of difference, and it can make a difference in the world. Regardless of how you feel about the current or incoming leadership in our nation, states or communities, your initial and ongoing response ought to be the same: lifting them up to the Lord.

Paul instructs Timothy to offer, first thing, petitions (requests for God to move), intercession (praying on behalf of others who may or may not pray for themselves) and thanksgiving (gratitude to the Lord) for all people and specifically for those in authority. Why? "That we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

Here's the thing: regardless of who is in authority, the instructions are the same:

1. pray for them, intercede for them, thank God for them;
2. live a quiet life in godliness and holiness.

You can live in godliness and holiness, regardless of who is in authority, even if no one around you or above you are. Part of living in godliness and holiness is praying for others; not for their judgment or for God to crush them, but for "all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." Imagine if the eyes of our nation's leaders were open to the truth of God, if their hearts were turned and if repentance flowed through Washington, D.C. and state capitol buildings!

It's not undoable, but first repentance and prayer needs to flow through our own homes and churches.

Thank you, Lord, that you call us to repent of our own sin and make a way for us in Jesus Christ. Give us hearts of gratitude for our nation and leaders and prompt us to make specific intercession on their behalf, that they may come to you. We lift them up as they make difficult decisions every day in things we know nothing about. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Pray For These Things

Colossians 1:9-12

“So we have continued praying for you ever since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you a complete understanding of what he wants to do in your lives, and we ask him to make you wise with spiritual wisdom. [10] Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and you will continually do good, kind things for others. All the while, you will learn to know God better and better. [11] We also pray that you will be strengthened with his glorious power so that you will have all the patience and endurance you need. May you be filled with joy, [12] always thanking the Father, who has enabled you to share the inheritance that belongs to God’s holy people, who live in the light.”

Have you ever stop to think about what you pray for? Are your prayers about physical needs or spiritual concerns? When you look at the prayers Paul prayed while in prison, they are somewhat unique. He prayed more for others than he did himself and most of his prayers for others were concerning spiritual rather than physical matters. We all need to find prayer partners like Paul. Paul prayed specifically for three things.

1. Paul first prayed for the church to have **spiritual wisdom** and **understanding**.

Paul wanted these believers to know, understand, and personally experienced the will of God in their lives. That is so important for every Christian. Paul understood that only happens as we grow in or understanding of God's Word and the ministry of His Spirit, and as we learn to live in fellowship as the body of Christ with each other. All three ... Word, Spirit, and church are absolutely essential for Christian growth.

2. Paul also prayed for their **practical obedience** in living out God's

will.

It has been rightly said ... *The devil finds his arsenal in the stockpile of our disobedience.* Listen we all need to practice what we preach. In other words, our confession and our conduct should be one and the same.

James 4:17 (NLT) ... *“Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.”* It is not right to compartmentalize what we believe from how we live. Paul says ... ***Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and you will continually do good, kind things for others. All the while, you will learn to know God better and better.*** It is so important that we live an consistent, authentic faith.

- 2, 3. Finally, Paul prayed for their moral character.

Paul understood that a Christian's character matters. He also knew that godly knowledge, conduct and service should always lead to the development of one's character.

Rick White ... Have you ever met people who seemed to know a lot about the Bible, yet the way they treated others did not resemble Jesus' words about loving and caring for people? One of the greatest detriments to the Christian witness in today's world is not our message, but our lack of character.

[illegible]

Lord, I am grateful that you have recorded in Your Holy Word the many prayers of Paul. He is a wonderful example of how Christians should pray. Teach me how to pray according to your precious will. Help me to care more about others and their spiritual needs. Shape me through a life of prayer.

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A faith that fits

James 1:22

I tend to wear shoes for a long time. By that I mean, several years. This summer I walked in wet grass and realized when my feet got wet it was time for me to get some new shoes. The shoes I've been wearing daily had worn all the way through so the padding was compressed, there were holes in the soles and the uppers just looked beat up. I broke down and got new shoes. This time I got two pair: everyday use and some ducks to wear in the rain.

Even after all the reviews and all the shopping and all the comparisons I did, my daily shoes felt great the first time I put them on. My ducks not so much. They're not bad, just different. I realized my problem pretty quickly. I'm not used to them. I have to break them in and not only reshape my shoes to me, but more importantly, get my own feet used to the shoes.

Canon and I have started spending some time playing catch with a baseball so i had to get a glove. I haven't had a glove in years. I had been working with him to break his in and I'm working to break in my new one, too. The truth is, I'm breaking in a lot of new stuff recently: shoes, ball gloves, a new schedule, new habits. And it all feels unnatural. For now.

Jas 1:22-- *22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.*

When I was training for triathlons, I took to running pretty easily. It was hard to get going, but it was the most natural. Riding the bike was my least favorite part. For most triathletes the swimming was the one they disliked the most. I understand that, but it wasn't the case for me. Eventually.

When I was younger I used to swim all the time. Our family had a pool so I swam most of the year and I swam in the river when we went sailing and even did the mile swim at summer camp one year. But I hadn't been swimming in years and years and had never learned to swim for a race. My first morning in the pool I had to learn how to breathe. I wasn't used to having water in my face like that and I coughed so hard I wondered what the policy was if someone vomited in the pool.

I struggled for several weeks, discouraged every time. But one morning everything clicked for whatever reason. I was still slow, but I was breathing well, my stroke was okay, I didn't cough at all, and I was so excited that I couldn't contain it! From that point on I knew I would be able to do it, even if I didn't do it perfectly all the time I knew it was possible for me to swim decently.

Our faith is the same way. Practicing the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Scripture study, church attendance, giving and evangelism are tough. That's why they're called disciplines. Living out our faith is not natural; it's supernatural. It requires us to choose to practice it. It may not feel right, you may feel like you're sputtering and you'll never get it right, but the time will come when your instinct will be to mention Christ or to pray instead of panic or to pick up the Word to read before bed instead of that last scroll on social media.

It is not just knowing what to do, but is learning to do it so that it becomes a part of you. My dad took golf lessons finally in his 60s. He said his coach told him he had a lot to unlearn. We all have stuff to unlearn so we can learn to do life right. Let us not delude ourselves by only hearing the Word, but let us work to become doers.

Thank you, Lord, for your word. Help me to unlearn my old ways and to practice your Word. In Jesus' name, amen.

Pastor Art Stafford

Trust God

LORD, I am thankful for this new day. I have no idea what this day holds, but You do because You made this day and You made me for this day. Thank You for the opportunities that You will give me today. Please help me to want You involved in every part of this day. Give me the grace to trust You for all that I will encounter and help me to be pleasing to You in all that I do and say. Please help my faith in You to grow. In the name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

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Hebrews 11:1-2 (NLT) ...“What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see. [2] God gave his approval to people in days of old because of their faith.”

Hebrews 11:8-10 (NLT) ...*“It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. [9] And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith—for he was like a foreigner, living in a tent. And so did Isaac and Jacob, to whom God gave the same promise. [10] Abraham did this because he was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God.”*

Q ... So what is faith? ... Faith can be defined as one's dependence on God. God-dependence can only begin when your self-dependence ends. Faith gives the believer the ability to treat the future as if it were today and the invisible as if it were visible.

Rob Zinn ... *Faith is as much at home in the realm of the*

impossible as it is in the possible. Faith is trusting Jesus Christ to do what He said He would do in my life. Faith is certain of God's promise, confident of God's power, perceives divine design, and acts on God's Word.

God called Abraham to live his life by faith, and he willingly obeyed. His calling was truly sacrificial. God wanted him to leave everything behind (his friends, family, future) and go to a place that wasn't even on a map for him to look at. And you know what he did? ... he went day by day as God guided his way. Why? Simply because he trusted God and obeyed.

What a beautiful example Abraham is for all of us. Oh that we could all be like him. Imagine what God could do if we all lived by faith. If God called Abraham to live by faith, then He will do no less with each of us.

Faith involves the risk of the unknown that God would have us involve ourselves in. Abraham had no idea what he was giving up everything for. If faith came with a road map, it wouldn't be faith. If faith revealed up front what was at the end of the journey, it wouldn't be faith. Faith requires that we trust God without knowing all the details.

Q ... What is God calling you to trust Him in today?

[illegible]

LORD, I confess that I need stronger faith if I am to live my life in a way that pleases You and impacts my neighbor. Please teach me to trust You for everything and walk with You through anything. Help me to obey Your every desire. I ask You to grow my faith like you did Abraham. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

How To Genesis 6:15

"This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high"

Who remembers the Time-Life "How To" book series?

You know, the "Complete Home Repair and Improvement" set (36 Volumes) that covered everything from "Adding On" to "Working with Wood" with all of the essentials in between; Basic and Advanced Wiring, Plumbing, Masonry, HVAC, Kitchens and Baths, Porches and Patios, Outdoor Furniture, etc, etc.

The industrious and motivated homeowner could build their own backyard brick patio and barbeque, with new hand built outdoor furniture placed on the freshly landscaped lawn area, just by following the instructions and tidy drawings in the corresponding Time Life "how to" book. My father-in-law had that complete set and I believe at some point he utilized skills learned from all 36 volumes.

Of course hardly anyone looks at books like this anymore. I have stated in the past that there seems to be a YouTube video for pretty much any project you might need to do these days. For example I had a knocking noise in the dash of my car a while back.

Google search: "knocking sound in the dash of a 2004 Pontiac Vibe."

And wouldn't you know it, up pops a YouTube link: "Fix knocking sound from dash, 04 Pontiac Vibe, Air Door actuator." - Bingo! Complete with some guy giving step by step video instructions.

I wonder if Noah wished he had a "How To" manual, not to mention a YouTube video, for building the ark.

The sixth chapter of Genesis tells us that;

"God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood;

Genesis 6:12-14a

Many of us remember the old Bill Cosby routine of the conversation between God and Noah;

God: "Noah, build an ark..."

Noah: "Right... What's an ark...?"

So God goes on to give Noah the "how to" instructions for building an ark;

"So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit high all around. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks."

Not even enough info to fill one chapter of one volume of a Time Life book!

But somehow, without a YouTube video or even a Time Life book, Noah built the ark. One has to wonder; just how on earth did he do that? God had given him some pretty general instructions, but we don't see a detailed set of blueprints here.

The writer of Hebrews gives us the answer;

"By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family." Hebrews 11:7

"By faith..."

We often talk about "saving faith" - but Noah's account is a very real example.

Genesis 6 tells us that even as *"... every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time."* that; *"Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord."* and *"he walked faithfully with God."*

Noah's faith to build, and even "how to" build an ark of salvation came through his walk, his relationship with God. I don't now what exact form it took, but I'm sure that God was guiding him all along the way as Noah; *"walked faithfully with God."*

Our grace "ark" of salvation is likewise built *"by faith."*

The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith..."

The faith that saves also builds;

"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." Colossians 2:6-7

-Pastor Ronnie Bunch

It Is Good To Praise God!

Psalm 92:1-2, 4

I confess that I am not always a morning person. Sometimes it is hard to get up and even harder to go before the LORD. But no matter how difficult it may be, the best thing I can do is start my day off on my knees in prayer. Most times I struggle for words to say. Never am I worthy to approach God. I find myself confessing sin more than singing to God. I am sure I am not alone.

Thank God for His unfailing love and faithfulness. He never wakes up and He never goes to sleep. He doesn't have bad days. He never struggles. Nothing is ever too hard for Him. He is perfect in every way. He is the most powerful Person in the universe. There is no one like our God. And there is no one that our God does not care about. God loves each one of us more than we can wrap our little minds around. God has been so good to love us and reach out to us to meet us in our needs. He is certainly worthy of our praise.

Psalms 92:1-2, 4 (NLT) ... *“It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to the Most High. [2] It is good to proclaim your unfailing love in the morning, your faithfulness in the evening, ... [4] You thrill me, Lord, with all you have done for me! I sing for joy because of what you have done.”*

Notice that the psalmist said that it is good to give God praise. That means that it is a delightful and respectful thing to do. It lifts our spirits and helps us to get our days started out the way they should be. It helps us to adjust our attitudes and control our actions. Praise is the very best way to use our tongues.

Martin Luther referred to this kind of good as “precious. “It is a precious opportunity to give God praise.” He said, “Come, let us sing a psalm and drive away the devil. Worshipping God is a wonderful and most reasonable thing to do.” Amen!

I hope no matter how your day begins, that you will make the most of the opportunity you have to thank God for His goodness to you. He deserves our praise and we all need to give it to Him.

<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<◇>>>>>>>>>>>>>

Father, thank You for letting me open my eyes this morning. Thank You for the life You have given me to live. Help me begin my day giving You the praise and worship that You alone deserve. Help my heart to love You more than anything! Thank you, Lord Jesus, for loving me enough to die for me. You have always and will forever be the BEST! Amen!

Reform or Transform?

Romans 12:1-2

Reform ... to make better by removing faults and defects.

Transform ... to change the condition, nature, of function of, , to change the personality or character of, to convert.

As you can see the goal of reformation is to only make you better. But the intent of transformation is to change you into something new. That is God's goal in forgiving and saving your lost soul. He wants to make something new of you.

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NLT) ... "What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!"

Ephesians. 2:8-9 (NIV) ... "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- [9] not by works, so that no one can boast."

So consider this question: ... ***If God accepts and saves me by His grace ... if His acceptance of me has nothing to do with how I live ... then why not just live any old way I want?***

It is true that some people are motivated to live a better life because they want to be the best people they can be. Other people are motivated to live a good life in hopes that God will forgive them of the sin they have committed. The Bible, however, presents another way of thinking: It reminds us that life is not just to be lived for ourselves. Neither is it to be lived just in hopes of God's acceptance. Instead, we are told to go live life as a beautiful, self-giving life because ... God loves you and has graciously accepted you. That is certainly the kind of love that Jesus

demonstrated on the cross.

Romans 5:8 (NLT) ... "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."

So what we should do is live our lives in gratitude for the extraordinary mercy of Jesus Christ our Lord. While none of us can ever repay God back for His Amazing grace, we should live with an inner joy and in obedience to Christ because of His great mercy.

Don't set resolutions that seek to reform you into a better person. Instead, come to Jesus and let Him transform you into the person God designed you to be in the first place. He has great plans for your life. He promised to shape you into the image of His Son. Let God help you reach your greatest God-given potential.

Romans 12:1-2 (NLT) ... "And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will accept. When you think of what he has done for you, is this too much to ask? [2] Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is."

~~~~~  
***Lord, I realize I don't need to just reform my life. And I don't want to be conformed to the ways of this world. So please transform me into the image of Your Son. Renew my heart and mind with the light of Your precious Word. Amen.***

***Pastor Randy Green***

# Spontaneous favor

*Philemon*

Slavery is nasty. People become slaves for different reasons, but ultimately slavery is simply bondage to another person. In the Greco-Roman world, the time in which the New Testament was written, slavery took place in these ways:

1. The helot was a citizen of a city that was in permanent submission to another state. For example Messina was subdued by the Spartans and forced to serve them.
2. Indentured servants were reduced to slavery in order to pay a debt and would be released when the debt was paid.
3. Chattel-slaves were simply the property of the owner.

Onesimus was a slave. In the letter to Philemon (please stop here and read the short letter to Philemon, the book just before Hebrews), Paul pleads with him to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ.

Onesimus was a runaway. Without knowing what else had taken place, we get the sense that he ran away, encountered Paul while Paul was imprisoned and Paul presented him with the Gospel, disciplined him and told him to return home. With him he sent this letter encouraging his brother in Christ to receive him as a brother. Following, he makes concessions to Philemon to help make things right.

**Phm 1:13-16--** *13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever-- 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even*

*dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.*

Paul and Timothy sent this letter to Philemon, Apphia (probably his wife) and to the church at Colossae to be read publicly. Why? Probably so that there would be (a) accountability and (b) understanding of Philemon's behavior upon receiving Onesimus, possibly setting the example for other believers in similar situations.

We live in a time of slavery, secrets and scathing. The Cambridge dictionary defines scathing as "criticizing someone in a severe and unkind way." Families, relationships, friendships, organizations, businesses and in fact, churches, are being torn apart by bitter rivals over things that have nothing directly to do with us. We live in a time when we are called terrible names because of who we voted for or for even the slightest of differing perspectives.

Onesimus offended Philemon by running away. Philemon offended Onesimus by enslaving him. Paul called them both to reconcile (as a spontaneous favor, not forced), offered to pay for damages, recognized the reality of the situation and called on the church as a witness to how it was handled and should be in the future.

There are those who have run away from us and maybe said terrible things about us. Maybe someone has come to us and told us about how hurt they have been. Maybe it is time for us to prompt both parties toward reconciliation and forgiveness, by their own choice, but in obedience to Christ. And maybe we have to sacrifice something to help that happen.

*Thank you, Lord, that you have reconciled us to yourself through Christ. We know that our own relationships need healing and reconciliation. Give us what we need to make that happen so that you will be glorified. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

## **Take As Directed: Seven Times a Day**

Psalm 119:64

*“Seven times a day I praise you...”*

One of my favorite scripture verses is found in Proverbs 17:22; *“A cheerful heart is good medicine.”* (NIV)

The story is told of a missionary physician by the name of Harold Adolph walking through his house one day and seeing this very verse on the wall of his daughter’s room.

Dr. Adolph thought, “If only I could harness the secret of that cheerfulness and share it with my patients, a great deal of physical and spiritual suffering could be avoided.”

Then he said another verse came to mind - Psalm 119:164; *“Seven times a day I praise you...”*

That verse he, he thought to himself, sounded like the instructions from the label on a prescription bottle.

Most everyone knows that I spent about 24 years working as a retail pharmacist before God called me into the ministry full time.

When I started filling and dispensing prescriptions way back around 1980, there were a number of medications that were to be taken 4 times a day. Occasionally, but quite rarely there were medicines prescribed to be taken 5 times a day. But I can honestly say I don’t ever recall a 7 times a day medicine.

Most patients had a hard enough time taking something four times a day, much less if they had to remember to take it seven times a day. This is why pharmaceutical companies develop medications that only need to be taken once or twice a day. It improves patient medication compliance, and ultimately provides more beneficial outcomes.

But Dr. Adolph suggests that this is one remedy that is best taken just as God prescribed it - seven times a day!

This is not to suggest that we should in a legalistic sense set our alarms to “call” us to praise seven times a day at a specific hour, but rather that we, as the Apostle Paul exhorts;

*“...pray continually...”* (1 Thes. 5:17)

Or, as we might see on the prescription instructions; “prn” “Pro Re Nata”—the Latin phrase meaning “as necessary or needed.”

In other words, be in a constant state of awareness of the presence of God in our lives, and praise Him for it!

Let’s face it, if we think about doing anything seven times a day it may seem a bit daunting, however when we consider the protection God provides for us throughout our days, and lives, seven times a day just seems like a good start.

When we consider God’s constant and eternal grace, that is indeed enough to give anyone a cheerful heart - and that’s good medicine!

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

## What's New?

Lamentations 3: 22-23 (ESV)

*"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;  
His mercies never come to an end;  
They are new every morning;  
Great is your faithfulness."*

Well, Happy New Year!

Welcome to 2021! I'm pretty sure everyone is glad to see 2020 in the rear view mirror. What a year that was!

Many people have expressed the desire to "get 2020 behind us" so that we can start anew and fresh in 2021. And here we are: January 1, 2021. A brand new year!

Woo hoo!

But, not to be the killjoy and throw water on the embers of your new year excitement, when you really get down to it... it's just another day. Another rotation of the Earth at the beginning of what we have arbitrarily deemed to be the start of another rotation around the Sun.

The coronavirus that was the paramount interest and concern of most people in 2020 did not wake up this morning and say; "Oh well, 2020 is over, I guess we are done here." Nope. And even though we are encouraged by the progress made in the development and administering of the vaccines, the virus is still with us.

For now anyway...

But at some point we will be done with it, and we will get back to some sense of normalcy. It will no longer be the thing that causes both grave concern, and even for some grave consequences.

It will cease.

But thank God for this promises found in His Word;

*"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;"*

The love of the Lord never ceases. It is eternal. And it just so happens that 2020 is part of eternity, as is 2021. (I know, this is earth-shattering news.)

Throughout all of the craziness of the past year (and who actually knows what 2021 may hold,) God's love for us has remained true, steadfast and eternal.

As we woke up this morning, and as we wake up every morning we can also trust that;

*"His mercies never come to an end;"* - His mercies and grace to us are likewise true, steadfast and eternal.

As is His faithfulness.

One of my favorite hymns uses these truth as the foundation for it's lyrics.

Great is Thy Faithfulness

Great is Thy faithfulness!

Great is Thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see;

All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—

Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Most of us will, at some point today, or over the next few days have someone "wish" us a "Happy New Year." In fact, I already did that at the beginning of this devotional.

But where will that "happiness" come from?

In our home we have a framed piece of calligraphy art with this message;

*"Contentment is realizing that God has provided everything I need for my present happiness."*

“All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—“

Whatever this new year holds for us, and whatever we may need, we have this promise; that the steadfast love, the mercies and faithfulness of God are eternal, even as they are new to us every morning.

What's new...? Just that.

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

# What's next?

*Judges 2:8-11*

We often look sideways at the Israelites, curious as to why they seemed to wander off so easily. "After all God has done for them, how can they forget?" Then reality hits us and we realize that we do the exact same thing.

We see it generationally, maybe in our own family, when a child raised in church grows up and decides religion isn't for him or her. We look back at our own lives and we try to prevent our children or the younger people we are impacting, not to make the same mistakes we made. Unfortunately I often hear parents say, "I can't really say anything about their decision to do that; I did the same thing. I don't want to be a hypocrite."

I am generally a hard-learner. I'm better about it now, but still, my tendency is to learn the hard way. I'm reminded of the time I was about 15 and we moved into a new house that had just been built. There was a big basement, which we'd never had, but the electricians had failed to cap a live wire and it hung down so the end of it was about 6 feet from the ground.

My father said, "Don't touch that wire; it's hot." I had never heard the term "hot" for electricity before, only "live." I had never felt a wire get hot before. What did I do? I reached up and touched it with my index finger. My whole arm went instantly numb as I screamed and jerked away. My dad cracked up until tears rolled down his cheeks. Needless to say, for the next 30 years, countless times I reached for a light switch only to have my dad grab me and go "ZZZZ!" before laughing at me again.

Needless to say, I'm not a big fan of electricity now.

**Jdg 2:8-11**-- *8 Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. 9 And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. 10 After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. 11 Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals.*

Why do you think the next generation didn't know the Lord? Were they not told? Did the parents leave out the scary parts about the Lord's anger? Or was it a fear of being called hypocrites? Or maybe the kids were unwilling to take it seriously. If you read chapter 1 you see that the Lord offered the land of Canaan to the Israelites, but they had to clear it. Instead, they fought and then enslaved some of the people. It was too hard because the Canaanites had iron chariots. So an angel came and said, "You were told to drive them out, but you disobeyed me. Now the people and their idols will become a snare for you."

And they did.

The Word of God has to be passed on. The truth of who he is and what he has done must be made known, especially as whole denominations deny the truth of God's Word and of his character in order to avoid offense. People still do evil, the Lord still gets angry and people still serve idols. Let's get the truth out there for the sake of coming generations.

*Thank you, Lord, that you sent people to speak the truth to me, even if I didn't like it. I know there are others who need to know. Prompt me to speak the truth at just the right time to the ones who need it. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

## Whom Shall I Fear?

Psalm 27:1

*"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"*

We have probably all seen lists, or perhaps even YouTube videos of the "Top 10 Phobias." I have even shared such a video during our worship set one Sunday morning.

That particular list was:

- |     |                |                               |
|-----|----------------|-------------------------------|
| 10. | Glossophobia   | Fear of Public Speaking       |
| 9.  | Necrophobia    | Fear of Death                 |
| 8.  | Arachnophobia  | Fear of Spiders               |
| 7.  | Acrophobia     | Fear of Heights               |
| 6.  | Sociophobia    | Fear of Socializing           |
| 5.  | Aerophobia     | Fear of Flying                |
| 4.  | Agoraphobia    | Fear of Open Spaces           |
| 3.  | Claustrophobia | Fear of Enclosed Spaces       |
| 2.  | Brontophobia   | Fear of Thunder and Lightning |
| 1.  | Myctophobia    | Fear of Darkness              |

This is just one list, and quite honestly it doesn't seem nearly as "scary" without the accompanying video. And besides that, I think this particular list is a little sketchy anyway since it didn't even include "Ophidiophobia" - the fear of SNAKES!

Randy likes to tease me because I just happen to suffer from "Ophidiophobia" but I like to remind him that I am in good company:

*"Then the Lord said to him, (Moses)  
"What is that in your hand?"*

*"A staff," he replied.*

*The Lord said, "Throw it on the ground."  
Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it."*  
Exodus 4:2-3

And then of course there's Indiana Jones.  
(Snakes... why'd it have to be snakes...)

These days a lot of people are suffering from  
"CORONOPHOBIA" - the fear of the corona virus.

Certainly anything that has caused this much disruption, destruction and even death deserves a healthy dose of respect... But fear...?

David Jeremiah looks at fear from this perspective:

"The really destructive thing about fear is that it distorts our perceptions - the way we see truth, the way we see God, the way we see ourselves. Fear tricks us into believing that God is not who He says He is. But there's more: Fear keeps us from God's plan for our lives, it discourages us, it negates God's promises, it steals away the things that God wants to do for us. The bottom line is that fear is debilitating!"

But let's be honest... we all have fears of one kind or another. Some folks are afraid of snakes (me), some folks are afraid of spiders (Randy).

So if fear can be so powerful, debilitating even, how do we get rid of it - or at least get around it. (And I don't mean "get around it" like the way I give snakes a wide berth.)

1 John 4:18 tells us that:

*“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear...”*

The way to cast out our fears is to know the One who is perfect love. God, who is *“my light and my salvation...”*

The Lord, who is the *“strength of my life...”* offers His perfect love. The way to drive fear out of our lives is to know and experience the love of God.

As we know and grow in that love we can say with the Psalmist:

*“whom shall I fear?” “of whom (what) shall I be afraid?”*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**



## Whose Plan?

James 4:15

*“Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’”*

So, here we are. It’s almost the end of January 2021.

Think back to the end of January 2020 (if you dare). We had all sort of plans for the year. In fact the last weekend of January I was in Appleton, Wisconsin at the planning meeting for the 2020 Builders for Christ mission trip.

Our Harvest Fellowship “Year at a Glance” had all sorts of activities, ministry and mission events planned and on the calendar. And then...

It is good to plan. In fact it is a part of the image of God we bear. Think about it - animals don’t really “plan.” Certainly there are some who follow instinctive migratory patterns, but they didn’t wake up this morning and say: “oh my goodness, it’s the end of January! We should have already been way south by now!”

But we humans make plans. We as a church make plans. Plans for worship, ministry and missions activities throughout the year. And again, that is a good and responsible thing to do.

We all know the old saying;

*“The one who fails to plan, plans to fail.”*

So our Harvest Fellowship Baptist Church “Year at a Glance” calendar is fast filling up with our plans for 2021.

But as we make our plans we need to heed the truths found in God’s Word.

*“We can make our own plans, but the Lord gives the right answer.”*  
(Proverbs 16:1 NLT)

*“We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps.”*  
(Proverbs 16:9 NLT)

The wisdom found in these passages remind us that God’s plans take precedence over man’s. We can, and should make our plans, but we must remember to leave room for God’s plans to change our plans.

James gives us this example to illustrate this principle:

*“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”*

We are looking forward to a great year of ministry together! And we have made plans for carrying out those ministry plans. But as we plan, we must also remember;

*“If it is the Lord’s will,”*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

# How Will You Escape?

**Proverbs 11:18-20, 31 (NLT)** ...*“Evil people get rich for the moment, but the reward of the godly will last. [19] Godly people find life; evil people find death. [20] The Lord hates people with twisted hearts, but he delights in those who have integrity. ... [31] If the righteous are rewarded here on earth, how much more true that the wicked and the sinner will get what they deserve!”*

**John 1:9-14 (NLT)** ...*“The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was going to come into the world.*

*[10] But although the world was made through him, the world didn't recognize him when he came. [11] Even in his own land and among his own people, he was not accepted. [12] But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. [13] They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan—this rebirth comes from God.*

*[14] So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father.”*

Praise be to God that He has revealed Himself to us through the Person of His Son Jesus Christ. God gave John the Baptist the privilege of preparing the way for the Messiah. I am sure that as John carried out the task of preaching about the coming of this Messiah, he had to be stunned

by the fact that anyone would reject Jesus and the life He came to offer. But just as they did reject Jesus in that day, they still do in ours.

Through out the Old Testament the Jewish people were taught about the coming of God's Messiah and they lived in anticipation of His coming. Then Jesus did come to His own people to free them from their adherence to the law and give them new life. Sadly, the majority decided to reject Him because Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they expected or wanted. To this very day, many still reject the Savior.

**Hebrews 2:3 (NLT)** ...*“What makes us think that we can escape if we are indifferent to this great salvation?”*

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand the gospel. It really is simple. Jesus was sent by God to die on a cross for our sins. He took our place and paid the sin debt we each owed. He died on that cross, was buried,

## Just as Christ Loved

Ephesians 5:25

*“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”*

Many (many) years ago I was on the Western Branch High School Track Team. But I was not a sprinter, long distance runner, hurdler, high or long jumper.

I was a pole vaulter.

I was not an Olympic or even college scholarship class of pole vaulter, but I did hold our high school record for a number of years.

I remember one particular “mind game” we would play with the vaulters from opposing teams when we would host the meets at our school. As they arrived down at our end of the track where the pole vaulting area was, we would have the bar raised all the way as high as it would go, as if that was the height we had been warming up with before they got there.

Needless to say, none of us had ever cleared that height, but it was an effective strategy and had an obviously daunting and intimidating effect on our opponents for them to see the bar set that high.

As we consider this passage from Ephesians, the apostle Paul “sets the bar” pretty high.

In fact Paul sets the standard for love and marriage so high that many may indeed feel intimidated and just not up to the task.

When we are told to love; “... *just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*”

Yeah... that’s as high as the bar can go.

Jesus died for His church, making the ultimate sacrifice of His life. How in the world is a mere human spouse actually supposed to live up to the model set by... God Himself...?

Daunting... intimidating...

But Paul gives us the key back in verse 18 of chapter 5:

*“... be filled with the Spirit,”*

With regard to modeling the selfless love demonstrated by Jesus, the only way we can fulfill God’s instructions to us as husbands... or wives... or children... or brothers and sisters in Christ... is to be filled with, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

As we allow God, through His Holy Spirit to love through us, we can have the kind of relationships that He intended. By first yielding ourselves to God, we can love others with the purity and consistency Paul advises.

When our relationships, perhaps even our marriage relationships are tested, we want to be able to “clear the bar.” We do this by being in right relationship with God and filled with His Spirit so that we can indeed love;

*“Just as Christ Loved”*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

# Knowing Him

2 Peter 1:3-4

One of the Christmas movies I used to watch every year was the Muppet Christmas Carol. I used to watch the Muppet Show growing up and formed a connection with them and each of their unique personalities and their ability to make me laugh. In the Muppet Christmas Carol, the retelling of the Charles Dickens classic, the Ghost of Christmas Present has no memory of the past, so he repeats himself. He greets Ebenezer Scrooge, inviting him to chat. "Come in and know me better, man!" he would cry with a hearty laugh. He would answer a question or tell Scrooge something, then he would laugh and say, "Come in and know me better, man!"

*A Christmas Carol* has been made and remade, rebooted, spoofed and quoted countless times, all with some loyalty to the spirit of the original. The Ghost of Christmas Present is always portrayed as having a short memory, because the past is someone else's responsibility, as is the future. He only has to know the present.

**2 Pe 1:3-4--** *3 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. 4 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.*

Peter begins his letter to the Church with a traditional greeting and blessing, but then immediately moves into an encouragement to cling to the promises of the God they know and have been empowered by. We are told that God, in His divine power, has given us everything we need for lives of godliness. Read that passage again and look at the depth and the descriptiveness of the phrasing. Peter is very specific

about what God has provided us and offered us and the benefits of it.

This all comes through "our knowledge of him who called us."

Here's a quick thought: Maybe we don't live in God's divine power so much, we cling to His promises, we don't participate in the divine nature and we haven't escaped the corruption of the world because we don't make an effort to continue getting to know God.

People who spend a lot of time together and talk, get to know each other. If we're smart and pay attention we learn what food and movies they like, what jokes we can tell or not tell them, what interests we share. That comes from time.

God wants us to get to know him. He doesn't want us to know Him like, "I've heard of Him" or "I saw him on TV". He doesn't want "We work on the same floor but we've never talked" or "we say hi when we pass in the hallway." He wants a lifelong relationship where we share everything with each other. There is a lot that God has to say to us and a lot he wants us to say to him. He doesn't just want confessions, he also wants us to lean on him and to tell him we're scared or angry or sad. He wants us to celebrate with him when we achieve something great and he wants us to hear his soothing words and to feel his presence when things didn't quite turn out.

God is a God of the Past, forgiving what we've done; He's a God of the future, preparing a way for us; He's a God of the present, walking with us right now. I can almost hear God calling out, "Come in and know me better!"

*Thank you, Lord, for giving us the privilege to know you. Thank you that you invite us in to share every part of our lives with you. Move us to know you more, like you know everything about us. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

## My Shepherd

Psalm 23:1

(KJV)

*“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”*

A few of us were talking the other night after a Praise Team rehearsal about how for some of us, usually of a certain age group or generation, there are particular passages of scripture that we feel just have to be recited in the good old King James Version. Psalm 23 being one example, and of course John 3:16 another.

I know... I’m telling my age here...

There are countless commentaries on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and even on this first verse of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, even the first half (or second half) of this one verse.

Likewise there are numerous translations. Here are a few:

*“The Lord is my shepherd; I have what I need.”* (CSB)

*“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”* (NIV)

*“The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need.”* (NLT)

The Psalmist begins with the statement; *“The Lord is my shepherd;”* Not: *“The Lord is a shepherd;”* but, *“The Lord is my shepherd;”*

So obviously for the Lord to be his shepherd, the Psalmist must identify as one of his sheep.

Truth be known, most of us probably don’t really want to be thought of as sheep. Let’s face it, they are not the most intelligent of creatures.

And if you have ever actually been around sheep, you know that they are not the soft fluffy white little bundles of joy that one might snuggle up with like a child’s stuffed animal lamb. They stink!

In order to make the statement: *“The Lord is my shepherd,”* we also have to recognize and affirm that we are the sheep. We do stupid stuff and we stink...

Yet, the shepherd, the Good Shepherd,

*“...lays down his life for the sheep.”* (John 10:11)

Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd has indeed laid down His life for His sheep. To accept the offer of salvation and provision from the Good Shepherd is to acknowledge His management, His ownership of us as the sheep.

Phillip Keller in his book, *“A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23”* makes these poignant statements;

“It is a tragic truth that many people who have never come under His direction or management claim that *“The Lord is my shepherd.”* They seem to hope that by merely admitting that He is their Shepherd somehow they will enjoy the benefits of His care and management without paying the price of forfeiting their own fickle and foolish way of life.”

Either we belong to the Shepherd, or we don't.

Is the Lord **my** shepherd... or He is just **a** shepherd...

This is a most serious and sobering thought which should make each of us search our own hearts and motives and personal relationship to and with the Good Shepherd.

Do you know the Good Shepherd? The Good Shepherd who promises that, *"I know my sheep and my sheep know me."*

Can you say along with the Psalmist, and countless other "sheep" who have responded in obedience and assurance to the call of the Good Shepherd;

*"The Lord is my shepherd..."*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

# No place for cowards

*Hebrews 10:35-39*

By now you've probably heard the term "cancel culture." This term describes the tendency of society to destroy the lives of those with whom they disagree. It is almost exclusively used by those on the political left against those on the political right. To cancel someone means to have them kicked off social media, to have them fired from their job (and not to be rehired by anyone ever), to have their products pulled from the shelves, to have their contracts canceled and all future business and livelihood forfeited. An apology and "sensitivity training" by the canceled individual may or may not allow for a slow rebuild into societal acceptance and maybe even a chance to begin providing for one's family again. Maybe.

Each week during prayer time I use the "Pray Today" app (a FREE app by Voice of the Martyrs) to share with the youth about a nation in which Christians are persecuted. The app gives information about the culture in that nation, who are the main persecutors of Christians, what the persecution looks like, if and how Bibles are accessed, the work of VoM and how specifically to pray. Then the youth pray for the Christians in that nation as we lead into our prayer time.

The lives those believers lead takes faith and courage. It takes a confidence in the Lord that cannot be canceled.

**Heb 10:35-39--** *35 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. 36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. 37 For, "In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay." 38 And, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back." 39 But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.*

The writer of Hebrews spends all of chapter 10 talking about the necessity, blessing and power of Christ's sacrifice. At the end of the chapter he reminds the Hebrews of their joy at withstanding persecution, losing their goods and standing beside those who are being persecuted, all knowing that their true reward will come later.

God says, "I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back." When given the opportunity to stand or to cower, which one will I be? It's hard to say sometimes. We miss plenty of opportunities to speak the truth in love (see Ronnie's devo from 2-19). We see believers, even pastors, walking away from the faith because "It's not for me" or "I didn't see proof." Even Jesus had people that followed him around for a while, but when he had hard teachings, they left. But his true disciples stayed, acknowledging they really had nowhere else to go but at Jesus' feet.

We are quickly coming to a place where we will be forced to stand or to shrink, to show confidence or cowardice. I love how the author puts the group of Hebrews in the same category as himself. He says, "We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved." By doing this he says, "We're in the same boat, you and me, and I'm going to stand up under whatever threat, tying my name to Jesus' name. And I know you will be there with me!"

Harvest is a church where the Gospel is preached. It is why we exist; it is, as the French would say, our "raison d'etre", our reason for being. Let me encourage you to stand, not to throw away your confidence, not to shrink back, but to have faith in the One who called you, saved you, and will stand by you.

*Thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness to us. Give me the courage to stand by Jesus and to stand with those who stand by Jesus, whatever may come. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Past Imperfect and Present Tense

*Romans 7:18-24*

Today is Presidents' Day. Closest to Washington and Lincoln's birthdays, it was a day set to honor and remember all of America's presidents. Originally called Washington's Birthday and celebrated only in Washington, D.C., this holiday was signed into law by President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1879 and it was moved to the third Monday of February by congress under the Uniform Monday Holiday Act in 1968, giving workers more 3-day weekends. It officially took effect in 1971.

Unfortunately we are watching the crumbling honor of those who have sacrificed to make our lives possible. A group of very smart visionaries, flawed and marred with weaknesses and vice, kicked against the most powerful army and navy in the world and told them that we would be better off on our own. They and men and women like them, fought, died, watched their homes and crops burn, but saw something greater ahead that, if successful, was worth the risk.

They were imperfect, just as we are. And now, 250 years later people are looking back and saying, "They did some terrible things and didn't see things the way we see them. They deserve no honor." Statues and monuments of imperfect people are being pulled down and monuments to other imperfect people are being put up.

**Rom 7:18-24--** *18 For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. 21 So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my*

*mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?*

Even Paul recognized his struggle and at his peak desire to do all that God wanted him to do and to leave behind his own wickedness, he could not do it! Someone once said, "Nostalgia is like grammar with the past perfect and the present tense." No more! Now we read the history of the world through a retrofitted 2000s lens and wonder about the barbarity of it all. While we kill the unborn for convenience and make it a point of ruining the lives of anyone who does not agree with our perspectives or said something ten years ago.

There's a reason people always say not to speak ill of the dead, because we certainly could! Who among us wants our worst qualities pointed out at our funerals? Who wants to be remembered by their worst traits or greatest struggles? None of us! We are all imperfect, we are all broken, we are all flawed. Let us not see each other for our worst, whether past or present, but pursue love and grace. That is, after all, how God pursues us.

We are told to honor our parents (Dt 5:16), love our neighbors (Gal 5:14), bless those who curse us (Lk 6:28) and to forgive (Mt 6:14). These all have to do with imperfect people. Honor the flawed, love those with weakness, bless those who hate us and forgive those who practice their vices.

Ultimately, what it comes down to is that our focus cannot be on the imperfect people around us, or even our own imperfect selves; rather our focus must be on the One who IS perfect. Paul continues in **Romans 7:25**, *Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

*Thank you, Lord, for my imperfections, that I can love other imperfect people more perfectly. In Jesus perfect name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**



# The God You Can Trust!

**Psalm 27:1-4 (NLT)** ... ***“The Lord is my light and my salvation—so why should I be afraid? The Lord protects me from danger—so why should I tremble?***

*[2] When evil people come to destroy me, when my enemies and foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. [3] Though a mighty army surrounds me, **my heart will know no fear**. Even if they attack me, **I remain confident**.*

*[4] The one thing I ask of the Lord— the thing I seek most— is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, delighting in the Lord's perfections and meditating in his Temple."*

Things are changing. Fear seems to be brewing. Fear is a very real thing. There are all kinds of things that people fear. There are many people who are afraid of death, but you have just as many who fear living. Many people woke up this morning fearing what they knew they would have to deal with today. Some will go to bed tonight fearing the unknown of tomorrow. Some people just fear fear itself and some people just live in fear for no know reason at all.

As you read this psalm, you can clearly see that David understood the meaning and the reality of fear at the highest level. Remember, this is the same young teenager who squared off against Goliath the giant. David wrote this psalm while he was a fugitive on the run from Saul. He spent a great many days hiding in caves while King Saul searched the land seeking to find and kill him. David knew what it was to be hated and despised. David had every reason to fear for his life. He truly understood

the issue of fear.

David wrote this psalm when he had every reason to be afraid. But it is easy to see in the words that he wrote that even though he was running for his life, he had an amazing confidence in the LORD. He knew that in the midst of the fight that God would ultimately give him the victory he needed and that he would get to enjoy the LORD's presence.

That is certainly a lesson we all need to learn. Even when things don't go the way we think they should, and even though we may have to face some fierce foes, our God will always be greater and there is amazing joy to be found as we come into His presence. He knows how to give us rest from our enemies. He promises to hide us from our troubles and set us high upon the rock of safety. It is so important for us to learn to trust God instead of living in fear. God is bigger than any problem you will ever face. You can live a far greater life with confidence in the LORD than just running in fear.

David knew God and he knew that God is the only One who can give real strength and rest to those who love Him.

[illegible]

*LORD, I live in a world that constantly seeks to lead me away from You and cause me to doubt Your promises. Please help me to seek and trust You with all my heart so that I can live a life that brings You glory and Your blessings to me. Help my trust in You to also impact my world so that others can come to know You.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# A Day With God

My Dad knew how to do pretty much anything. There were so many times when I would call him on the phone or walk down to my parents just to ask him a question about something or get his opinion. He always seemed to have the answer I needed. Through the years he help me make a lot of decisions. I haven't been able to call on him now for over twenty-five years. He went to be with the Lord and I no longer get to talk to him. Since his passing, there have been many times that I found myself reaching for the phone to make one more call to him. Oh, what I would give to spend just one more day with Dad.

Every day God gives to us is a blessing. We all get to decide what we are going to do with this blessing. It is so important that we make the most of each day. Our days come and go like water running under a bridge. Once it has passed, it will be gone forever and you will never get to live it again. Dad told me when I turned twenty that my time was now going to start getting faster and faster and that one day I would wake up and be an old man. He was right. Where has the time gone!

David wrote some interesting words about his relationship to the Lord that can help us know how to use our time in a way that grows our relationship with God. Notice several things David ask God to do for him:

**Psalm 25:4-5 (NLT)** ... “Show me the path where I should walk, O Lord; point out the right road for me to follow. [5] Lead me by your truth and teach me, for you are the God who saves me. All day long I put my hope in you.”

First, David ask God to show him the right path to chose for the day. In

any given day, there are multiple decisions that we will have to make. Most have two or more choices that can be made. Jesus taught us to pray not for our will, but for His will to be done. So much of God's will is revealed in Scripture. There are other times that God shows us through His Spirit what He wants us to do. The key in choosing the right path is being able to discern either through His Word or the Holy Spirit. We all need to learn to hear His voice.

The next thing David ask God to do was to point out the right road for him to follow. Roads are much longer than paths. Roads have longer affects on our lives. Roads take longer to travel and take us to distant places. Roads also have many turns and even forks that are not always simple choices to make. We certainly need the Father's directions to help us make it to where He wants us to be.

Finally, David ask God to lead him in truth. This is especially where we need to know God's voice over all the crowd noise. This is where we much have ears that can hear God. If I have learned anything in life, I have learned that God is speaking ... I just need to stop and listen. Please understand that God will typically use three things to help you discern His will for your way. He will certainly bring to your remembrance special Scripture passages. The Holy Spirit will also help you to know the right direction to take. God will even use the godly counsel of brothers and sisters in Christ. God wants you on the right path! So learn how to spend your day with God.

[illegible]

***Heavenly Father, I want my day to be a blessing for me and for You to others. Please help me to make the right decisions and go in the right direction. Guide me step by step to make a kingdom difference and bring You the most glory. In Jesus name, Amen!***

## The Currency of Honesty

1 Peter 2:12

*“Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation”*

In America, our currency is the Dollar. In England it is the British Pound Sterling. Much of Europe recognizes the Euro as the standard currency. Japan, the Yen... Mexico, the Peso... Thailand, the Baht... India, the Rupee, and on and on.

Every country of the world has some form of officially recognized currency with which it transacts business. This currency must be trusted in order for it to be the medium of exchange between two or more parties.

Of course some currency has its own intrinsic value, like a gold coin. Other times, as with paper dollars, mutual trust establishes worth and value.

And so it is with honesty.

Someone has said; “Honesty is the currency of God’s Kingdom.” We know and believe that God’s Word is true and honest. Jesus, praying to the Father for His disciples made the statement;

*“Sanctify them by the truth; Your Word is truth.”*  
(John 17:17 NIV)

And so when we honestly speak the truth of God’s Word, mutual trust allows us to transact the spiritual business of God’s Kingdom - the saving truth of the gospel message.

But our lives... our *“conversation,”* must likewise reflect that truth and honesty in order for the spoken word to be recognized as legitimate. If we try to share the gospel, conduct “spiritual business” as it were, with counterfeit currency - lies, falsehoods, half-truths or exaggerations - the transaction will be seen as a sham and have no lasting or intrinsic value. No kingdom purpose.

In Ephesians 4:15 the Apostle Paul reminds us to;  
*“speak the truth in love.”*

Many years ago I had the truth of Paul’s counsel presented this way:

Speaking the Truth without Love - leads to Legalism

Speaking Love without Truth - leads to Liberalism

Speaking the Truth *in* Love - leads to the Liberty found in a saving relationship with God through Christ.

The apostle Paul also reminds to;  
*“Let your conversation be always full of grace,”*  
(Colossians 4:6 NIV)

Our honest and truthful presentation of the gospel must be *“full of grace”* because the gospel message is all about grace!

But Paul goes on to say;  
*“...always full of grace, seasoned with salt...”*

Salt was actually a recognized form of currency in the first century. Being so valuable, soldiers in the Roman army were sometimes paid with salt instead of money. Their monthly allowance was called "salarium" ("sal" being the Latin word for salt). This Latin root can be recognized in the French word "salaire" — and it eventually made it into the English language as the word "salary."

Both the grace message of the gospel, and its presentation.... the *"seasoning,"* when shared in honesty have intrinsic value and can be recognized as legitimate *"currency."* Spiritual currency.

May our *"conversation"* always be in the currency of honesty as we conduct the business of sharing the saving truth of the gospel.

***-Pastor Ronnie Bunch***

## A True Friend

Proverbs 18:24 (NASB)

*“A man of too many friends comes to ruin,  
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”*

The concept of “friend” has pretty much been redefined by social media these days.

On February 4, 2004, a Harvard sophomore named Mark Zuckerberg launched The Facebook, a social media website he had built in order to connect Harvard students with one another. By the next day, over a thousand people had registered, and that was only the beginning.

In the early days of this most prominent social media platform people accumulated so-called “friends” by the hundreds. Often those “friends” were people they barely knew - perhaps an acquaintance of an actual friend, or some long-lost childhood playmate, high school classmate, or even distant relative.

Yet the term used on this social media site was “friend.”

Participants soon realized what psychologists have long said; No one can manage more than a half dozen or so actual friendships. And so, another term came into existence;

*“Unfriending”*

Dictionary.com has an actual definition of *“Unfriending:”*

*“Removing (someone) from a list of friends or contacts on a social networking website.”*

The wisdom of Solomon warns us that having too many “friends” can be dangerous, and perhaps even lead to ruin. But a true friend is one who *“sticks closer than a brother.”*

And notice the wording; there is a *“friend”* (singular) not *“friends”* (plural) *“who sticks closer than a brother.”* It is a rare thing to have friend of such caliber, and it is indeed a blessing when one does.

Here is a proven truth; *“True friendships take time...”*

Part of that time may be spent recovering from the unfortunate disappointments that come with all human relationships. Jesus knew that kind of disappointment even as He dealt with His own disciples.

Yet in John 15:14-15 Jesus calls them His friends;

*“You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”*

As Jesus invested Himself in the life of His disciples... His friends, we too need to invest in the lives of others... our true friends. We do this by first, investing in our friendship with Jesus, and then allowing that friendship with Him to shape and influence our earthly friendships.

We all need to be that kind of friend to someone, and we all need that type of friend in our lives. The kind of friend who *“sticks closer than a brother...”* and encourages one to grow in obedience in their walk with Christ.

Long before Facebook coined the term *“unfriending”* God’s Word warned us that sometimes we need to do just that with those who may call themselves our “friends” yet are not really in true friendship with us or Jesus;

*“...don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”*

James 4:4

There is a familiar old hymn titled;  
“What a Friend We Have in Jesus”

Jesus is indeed that “true friend.” God’s Word tells us in James that we can *“choose to be a friend of the world,”* or we can choose to be a friend of the One who desires a relationship... a friendship with us... a True Friend.

***-Pastor Ronnie Bunch***

# Trustworthy

3 John 11-12

With the recent passing of political commentator and talk show pioneer Rush Limbaugh, the responses to the news was quite varied. Some, with giddiness, publicly wished him eternal torment while others in grief, took hope in his eternal rest. Regardless of where on the spectrum someone's feelings lay about Rush Limbaugh, his impact on the political climate is irrefutable. He was, and will always be regarded as, an icon.

We have Christian teachers and preachers who are well-known and almost iconic as well. A couple of centuries ago there was Charles Spurgeon and Jonathan Edwards. In more recent history, J. Vernon McGee and of course Billy Graham. My own personal trusted teachers are Adrian Rogers, David Jeremiah, James Merritt, and, yes, Randy Green and Ronnie Bunch. These are men that are rooted in truth and will speak from the Word with reverence for the author and message.

When I was growing up we didn't have Christian television stations. We had pastors who would preach on the air by purchasing a spot on a local channel and we had the 700 Club in the middle of the day. But then a Christian channel was born and it grew. In recent history, there have been other channels arise and the range of teaching is broad. Some are trusted names and others are untrustworthy.

The apostle John was an icon, a trusted teacher, even in his day, and in 1-3 John he focused heavily on truth in his letters.

**3Jo 1:11-12--** *11 Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. 12 Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone--and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.*

John sent this letter to a church through one of his disciples, Gaius. In the letter he commended the church for embracing the truth, but he also mentions a man, Diotrephes, as someone who had closed the door to the disciples' teaching. It is unclear whether Diotrephes was a part of the church body receiving this letter or part of another church, and John was trying to prevent his attitude and actions from setting the tone for other churches in their rejection of trusted teachers.

In v11 John reminds the church not to imitate evil but to imitate what is good. He makes a bold assertion that those who do evil have not seen God. They don't know how to recognize him and have no idea what he looks like. And then he mentions Demetrius. This is the only time we see this name in Scripture. He's not a key player in the world, but John says even the truth speaks well of him!

We live in a time of uncertainty of doctrine and biblical identity and even those who bear the label "reverend" or "pastor" or "Christian." My question is, how does the truth testify about you? Not what do you say about truth, but the other way around. Does the Word of Truth recognize you as a true follower of Jesus? When it is not socially acceptable or politically prudent, do you still stand on the side of truth?

The truth can be hard to speak when it is heavily resisted and it can be hard to live when the labels others place on us seem so heavy and irremovable. John spoke of Demetrius from a place of truth. Even if only the handful of people knew his name and watched his life, truth was a witness, too.

When pressed for an answer, will truth speak well of us?

*Thank you, Lord, for your Truth. Thank you for those who continue to live in it and proclaim it. Strengthen me to stand in the truth when I am too weak to do it. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# A king's prayer

2 Chronicles 6:28-31

As much as I loved the dedication of our new building and as much as I have loved the other church building dedications I have been to, none have matched the wonder described of the dedication of Solomon's Temple. In 2 Chronicles 3-7, the building and dedication of the temple is described, everything from the materials used to the decorations and furnishings, to the work of the priests and the response of the people.

There are a couple of parts that hold significant affection for me. The first is when the priests and musicians sang in praise and worship to the Lord, singing, "He is good; his love endures forever." Then v 5:13-14 continues, *Then the temple of the Lord was filled with a cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God.*

That just gives me chills. It's beyond my imagination what that must have been like. The second part that holds my affection is the prayer of Solomon on behalf of his people in chapter 6. One of the reasons this is so meaningful to me is that Solomon sounds a lot like his dad. How many times do you think Solomon watched or heard David pray? Solomon's prayer here shows what was passed down, what he understands about God's character, his listening ears and his desire to answer the prayers of his people.

When is the last time we have had a national leader openly pray to the biblical God, acknowledging God as he shows himself, acknowledging our deep sinfulness and deep need of his grace, and bowing to his wisdom over our innovation?

Go back and read chapter 6 completely to see the depth of the king's prayer, but for now, reflect on this passage:

**[2Ch 6:28-31--** 28 *"When famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when enemies besiege them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, 29 and when a prayer or plea is made by anyone among your people Israel--being aware of their afflictions and pains, and spreading out their hands toward this temple-- 30 then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive, and deal with everyone according to all they do, since you know their hearts (for you alone know the human heart), 31 so that they will fear you and walk in obedience to you all the time they live in the land you gave our ancestors.*

We desperately need the Lord to move in our nation. We are looking at a famine of values, a plague of wickedness, a blight of vile insight. We have politicians, leaders and activists that are destroying our homes like locusts, devouring all we hold dear and it is a disaster and a disease.

Solomon pleads for God to hear, forgive and to deal with us as needed. This is where truth kicks in: "when a prayer or plea is made by anyone... aware of their afflictions and pains and spreading out their hands [toward this temple] (where God dwells)."

Many of us are not truly aware of our afflictions and pains. We do not recognize our sinfulness or we deny the famine or the besieging of our cities. It is time, child of God, to acknowledge the truth of where we are and what we face, to be aware of our burdens and to turn to the Lord, spread out our hands and plead with God to do his work.

*Thank you, Lord, that you are not surprised by our affliction. Thank you for your Word, in which I can trust and your presence, in which I rest. Help me see the truth of my own need and the need of this nation, that I will call out to you and follow in obedience. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**



# A little rain

*Matthew 5:44-45*

This weekend as Canon and I were working on a project together we talked about watching a movie together. He said he had never seen *A Bug's Life* and we agreed to watch that one. While that is not my favorite Pixar movie, I do like it and was looking forward to watching it together. I had forgotten how clever and funny some of the artwork, situations and dialogue were.

If you aren't familiar with the story, it is about a colony of ants who have to provide food for the larger, threatening grasshoppers. As ants, of course, everyone works. One ant, Flik, thinks differently and wants to see things done better, which makes him the laughing stock. At one point Dot, the little sister of the queen ant heir apparent (is that how ant royalty works?) found Flik the comiserated on their shared plight. Flik couldn't get things to work right and Dot was too small.

Flik decided that Dot needed encouragement and pointed to the giant tree they lived under. He told her that everything that made that tree a tree was already in a little seed. All it needed was time, sun and rain and "Voila!"

**Mat 5:44-45--***44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children 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.*

In the middle of Jesus' "sermon on the mount" he spoke about loving your enemies. This was a new concept for the Jews. In their culture you were allowed to love your friends and hate your enemies. For Jesus to tell them otherwise was new and a little strange, but he said, if you love your friends and hate your enemies, how is that different than the pagans?

I really want to focus on the statement he makes about sun and rain in v45. Flik told Dot that what made the tree become the tree was sun, rain and time. That's the same thing that matures us in Christ. Of course, it takes time, lots of time, to grow up in Christ. That's why we talk about mature Christians as those we go to for wisdom, for prayer and for help in other ways.

The sun and rain, however, are how we may see our life circumstances. We consider the good times, the blessings, as sunshine and the hardships as rain or storms. "Into every life a little rain must fall," we say. Jesus said everyone gets rain and sun.

Last night Canon came downstairs a little before bedtime and asked to play a video game with me. At the moment we didn't have time and when I told him, he was upset. "I don't know if I'm just unlucky or if God doesn't love me," he said. "I didn't get to play my game, no one could play with me outside today and I have to go to bed."

I said, "Of course, it's because God doesn't love you. You have to earn that."

I'm kidding! I didn't say that! We briefly talked about it and made an appointment to play tonight after he finishes his homework.

It's really easy for us to assume that God has a problem with us whenever our life is hard for a season. But we have to know that in order for us to become the mature oak of a disciple we are called to, we have to have sun, we have to have rain and it will take a lot of time. Make the most of the time, soak in the rain and enjoy the sun, and "Voila!"

*Thank you, Lord, for the sun and the rain. Give me just what I need, whether I like it or not. In Jesus perfect name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Cleaning house

*Matthew 21:12-14*

This week is Holy Week, the time span between Palm Sunday and Resurrection Sunday, or Easter. On each day of Holy Week we remember Jesus' ministry as he approached his "trial", execution and resurrection. On Palm Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey and people waved palm fronds, laid some on the ground and cried, "Hosanna!"

Today is called Holy Monday. On Sunday night Jesus stayed in Bethany, a village at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Two key events that took place on Monday were when he cursed the fig tree for not producing figs, causing it to wither, and when he cleared the temple of money changers and merchants.

**Mat 21:12-14--** *12 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 13 "It is written," he said to them, " 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.' " 14 The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.*

What was Jesus' problem with those selling doves in the temple court? The general understanding covers several areas. First, it was the hiking of prices of animals approved for sacrifice. Doves were acceptable sacrifices if they were perfect, but a pair that would normally cost a small amount could cost up to 20 times as much in the temple during Passover season.

Also, people came from all over the region, bearing local currency, but the temple priest declared that only the Tyrian shekel was acceptable currency, in part because of a higher percentage of silver in the coins. Of course in order to exchange currency there was a high fee. Jesus was upset at

both buyers and sellers as it prompted an environment of abuse.

Mostly, however, it was for two reasons. First, although it would not likely change the environment since most of the tables would be set up the next day, it fulfilled messianic prophecy and was a sign of Jesus' identity (John 2:17). Secondly, it went against the purpose of the temple: a house of prayer. The marketplace was a marketplace and the temple was the temple. The purpose of the temple was as a place of prayer and to give God the reverence He is due.

Today, many churches have forgotten or even abandoned their purpose. Churches do not do this on their own, but by the will of the members and leaders.

Charles Spurgeon says, "I do not believe we shall thoroughly purify any church by Acts of Parliament, nor by reformation associations, nor by agitation, nor by any merely human agency. No hand can grasp the scourge that can drive out the buyers and sellers, but that hand which once was fastened to the cross. Let the Lord do it and the work will be done, for it is not of man, nor shall man accomplish it."

Just like churches need to maintain their purpose, so do we. If Jesus has the authority to clear out the temple, does he not also have the authority to clean out that which keeps us from being what we are created to be? Of course he does. This week, take time to ask the Lord to turn over your tables and to drive out the impurities from your heart and mind. According to 1 Cor 6:19, you are the "temple of the Holy Spirit." Does Jesus need to clean house?

*Thank you, Lord, for reminding me who I am in you. I know there are some things in me I cannot remove by sheer will. Come clean your temple so I can be transformed more into your image. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Consider the source

*Proverbs 3:7*

Every man has stories of being a boy. In some ways we never really outgrow it, we just come to recognize our own humanity and the limitations that come with it, as we age.

One of the most popular scenes in the movie *Jaws* was when Sheriff Brody, Hooper and Quint were comparing scars while drinking and waiting for the Great White to make another appearance. I, like most men, have my own share of scars: two on my forehead from water skiing and jet skiing, one on my finger from a large pocket knife, one on my knee from falling on a bag of trash and being sliced with a can lid, and a particularly nasty one on my foot from dropping a glass 2-liter soda bottle that exploded.

Most of my scars aren't really from foolish decisions, just things that happened by nature of living. My emotional and relational scars, however, are almost entirely from foolishness. Some of are from being young and not knowing any better, but some are from responding out of emotion, rather than virtue. And of course some scars are just because something seemed like a good idea at the time, but I did not take the time to seek advice before acting.

**Pro 3:7--** *Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.*

This verse is in the middle of a passage regarding wisdom. The previous verses are more well-known:

**Pro 3:5-6--** *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*

According to biblical scholars, the word "Trust" in this passage gives the image of a servant, "helpless" to act on their own,

waiting for their master's command and willing to follow in obedience.

We are living in a time where people are blatantly denying reality, even obvious reality, for the sake of following their own "wisdom." With even minimal effort we are able to imagine the long-term effects of such foolishness. Many are looking to the government, the academies, corporations, technology companies, psychology, medical professionals and, even worse, "within themselves" for wisdom.

The first half of v7 tells us what NOT to do: consider ourselves wise; the second half tells us what we ARE to do: fear the Lord and shun evil (KJV says "depart from evil"). What does this look like? For each of us it will be different, depending on how we view the world around us.

The broad scope is the same, however: To fear the Lord means we are to recognize the reality of Who He is as He has revealed Himself in His Word and work. We are to recognize His character traits, including His holiness, justice and mercy. This means we also must expect Him to act. The second part is to shun, or depart from, evil. We cannot fear the Lord while embracing wickedness. Even as uncomfortable as it may be, we must let go of things that counter our trust in God.

Maybe you need to stop apologizing for holding to God's standard. Maybe you need to stop using language you know is a lie, just to appease someone's feelings. Maybe you need to worry less about offending others and instead speak the truth with compassion. Whatever it is, it is time to fear the Lord, shun evil and stop looking to yourself as wisdom's source.

*Thank you, Lord, for your wisdom. Thank you that you have given us your Word and your Spirit, that we can both fear you and obey you. Give me what I need to shun evil and to speak truth and wisdom in the world. In Jesus perfect name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# With All My Heart!

My Dad used to say that anything that is worth doing is worth doing right. My coach used to tell me to give him a 100% on the field. My God tells me to serve Him with all my heart. Well, just what does that mean?

What does serving God with all your heart really mean? And what exactly is God referring to when He says ... ***“your heart?”***

**Deuteronomy 10:12-13 (NIV)** ...“*And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, [13] and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?*”

So what exactly constitutes the heart? The idea of the heart refers to the center of your being, the seat of your emotions, and the primary source of your devotion. It has nothing to do here with the physical organ in your chest. So when God instructs us that we are to serve Him with all of our hearts, He is wanting us to serve Him with all our mind, all of our will, and all of our emotions. That's what God wants.

But unfortunately, by nature our mind, our will, and even our emotions do not want to serve the Lord! We tend to take care of our wants first. We typically do what we want to do! Well, how do we change? Three thoughts:

1. Stop and be honest and recognize that your self-centeredness is sinful.
2. Next, go to Jesus through prayer and ask Him to forgive you.
3. Make sure that you have accepted Him as your Lord and Savior.

Please understand that when you do these things, and not a second

before, that that is when God begins the work of shaping and transforming your mind and heart.

**Philippians 2:1-5 (NLT)** ...*“Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and sympathetic? [2] Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one heart and purpose.*

***[3] Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. [4] Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing.***

[5] Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had."

Another way to say this is that ... your thinking will become more like Jesus. Your thinking will change. Your attitude will change. And thus your actions will change.

**Ezekiel 36:26-27 (NLT)** ...*“And I will give you a new heart with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony heart of sin and give you a new, obedient heart. [27] And I will put my Spirit in you so you will obey my laws and do whatever I command.”*

[illegible]

***Lord, my goal each day is to serve you with all my heart! I know my heart is basically wicked. I give You my heart for You to shape and transform. Please teach me to love and serve You with all my heart.***

# Drawing a crowd

*Acts 2:1-6*

There's a lot of talk in marketing and in the culture in general about something going viral. A cute video on social media or of someone doing something unexpectedly kind can go viral, which means it draws an online crowd because people share it on their own social media pages. Almost any time you watch a video online you will be asked to like, subscribe (or follow) and share. By liking and sharing videos, the channel makes money. Sponsors buy ad space in front of popular videos or channels. People can make tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars a year by being a "social media influencer", reviewing products or travel destinations.

But there are other ways to draw a crowd. Billy Graham held free crusades for decades, drawing tens of thousands at each one. Some speakers sell out arenas and stadiums charging as little as \$10 or as much as hundreds. Jesus sometimes had crowds waiting for him because they heard he would be passing through. But even after he died, rose again and ascended, he could draw a crowd.

**Act 2:1-6--** *1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.*

Pentecost is fifty days after Passover. This means that after Jesus rose from the dead and spent 40 days with his people

before ascending, that his disciples spent about a week praying together before the Holy Spirit showed up and they began to teach. The Lord waited until a crowd would be there before he gifted the disciples with foreign tongues.

Dave Guzik mentions that since there were not many homes that could hold 120 people, the disciples were likely in one of the upper rooms in the Temple court. In Acts 2:6 it says the crowd gathered in response to the sound. We don't know whether it was the sound of the mighty wind or of the disciples' speaking, but a crowd gathered nonetheless. It is likely that the disciples stood on balconies as they proclaimed the Gospel, with Jews from all over the world gathered in one place to hear it in their own language.

Imagine the conversations as they went back home. "How was your trip, Joshua?"

"Dude, I've never seen anything like it. Check this out..."

Here's the question: what kind of noise is your life making? Noise that is out of place from anything else others are hearing. What does your life sound like? What do your words reflect? How does your life display something so unusual, so different as to cause people to turn their heads and crane their necks, asking, "What's going on over there? What is that person talking about? And why does it sound like they're talking specifically to me?"

The truth is, God is already drawing a crowd and it's time to make some noise. Rather than worrying about all that you may not know or may not be able to answer, speak about the Lord and his amazing work, his offer of grace through Jesus.

*Thank you, Lord, for drawing a crowd. Make enough noise in me and through me that people come to understand Jesus. Help me to speak it in their language In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Christ Our Redeemer

Ephesians 1:3-4

*How we praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we belong to Christ. [4] Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.*

I love these words of encouragement. They are awesome words that invite us to begin our day with praise and gratitude to the LORD. Twice Paul reminds of how God has blessed us. In the original language, the root of the word **ble<sup>ss</sup>** is the idea of “good.” All that our heavenly Father has given us is good ... so doesn’t it make sense to we should intentionally make the time to thank Him and praise Him with good words that come from our lips.

Paul reminds us of two wonderful gifts that we have received because of what Christ has done for us:

1. Jesus invited us to experience the spiritual redemption that we all desperately need.

No one likes to be rejected. You can't live life without experiencing it. It hurts. No one likes to be pushed away, abandoned, or rejected. God loves you so much that He has devised a plan so that you will never have to experience that from Him. Jesus paid the ultimate price so that God

could stretch out His arms wide open and invite you into His family. Praise God that is an invitation to everyone.

2. He also wants you to understand that God has a plan for your life.

Long before He spoke the world into existence, God had you on His mind. Hard to imagine, but it is true. His plan is based on His desire to make you pure and perfect in His sight. He knows we all have a sin problem, but He loves us too much to leave us in sin. I know you have read that in the Bible, but again let me remind you of what it cost for God to execute His plan. It cost God His one and only Son, and it cost Jesus His life. God's perfect Son took on the burden and full consequences of our sin on Himself so that His spotless righteousness could be inserted under our names. He gave us our right standing with God. He took our punishment on the Cross. We are redeemed in Christ.

If you know Christ, then you are ready to stand in the presence of God without any fear of judgment! Oh how wonderful that sweet gift is! Be encouraged and give God the praise He deserved for His wonderful plan of redemption!

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*Father, thank you for loving me even when you have seen me at my worst. I am grateful for your grace and mercy and for Your precious gift of redemption. Thank you for having a plan for my life, both here and in eternity. I praise you LORD, Amen!*

## I Shall Not Want

Psalm 23:1

(KJV)

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."*

Last week's devotional focused on the first half of this verse, and just what it means to be able to say;

*"The Lord is my shepherd;"*

If and when we can truly make that statement, then we can also say along with the Psalmist;

*" I shall not want."*

Want. We've probably all heard examples or stories of the difference between perceived "wants" verses "needs."

For example I know that one of the essential needs for survival is water. I *need* drinking water to survive. But there are also times when I *want* to get in the water and ride waves. I don't necessarily *need* to surf, but there are times when I sure *want* to surf! ( I know, some of my surfing buddies will see this as abject blasphemy...surfing should definitely fall in the "*need*" category!)

But the Hebrew word translated "*want*" in the KJV version actually combines the idea or concept of want and need.

Again, some other translations:

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I have what I need."* (CSB)

*"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing."* (NIV)

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need."* (NLT)

The Hebrew word for want, "haser," has a broader meaning.

No doubt the main concept is that of lacking nothing, needing nothing that has not been provided by "*my shepherd*" - the Good Shepherd.

But the second emphasis is the idea of being utterly contented in the Good Shepherd's care and not craving or desiring - not "*wanting*" - anything more.

In our culture of discontented consumerism wants are often perceived as needs. We want/need a new \_\_\_\_\_.  
(Just fill in the blank.)

The Apostle Paul reminds us in Philippians 4:19 that;

*"God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."*

When David penned the words of Psalm 23, he wrote with the experience and perspective of a shepherd. He had known the deprivations associated with the life of a shepherd. He had known want.

But from the perspective of a shepherd, David also knew that the flock under his care was totally dependent on the shepherd to provide for their best interest and even their needs.

When all is said and done the welfare of any flock is dependent upon the care and management afforded them by their owner. To recognize and accept the Good Shepherd's ownership of us, His flock, is to also be able to say with David;

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

# The New Heart

People of all kinds struggle with anger, fear, temptation, pride, jealousy, envy, lying, and even the occasional potty mouth event. The honest truth is that on some level all of us deal with these issues and more. No one can deny that these are problems but they are also symptoms of a much deeper issue ... a sinful heart.

It has been said that what is down in the well always comes up in the bucket. If it is in your heart ... too often it finds it's way out your mouth.! You will never be able to erase the hard drive of your soul. Garbage in ... garbage out!

**Jeremiah 17:9 (NLT)** ... “The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?”

**Luke 6:45 (NLT)** ...*“A good person produces good deeds from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil deeds from an evil heart. Whatever is in your heart determines what you say.”*

**Proverbs 4:23 (NLT)** ... “Above all else, **guard your heart**, for it affects everything you do.”

We all need to guard our hearts from the garbage of this world. We all need to build a fortress around our hearts to keep the garbage out. That is a good thing to do and you can do that with a steady diet of God's Word and by living a life of prayer. What we really need to do is make sure that we are not just watching over and protecting a wicked heart. What we really need is a new heart.

**Psalm 51:9-10 (NLT)** ... “Don't keep looking at my sins. Remove the stain of my guilt. [10] Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.”

To get a new heart ... you don't need a heart surgeon ... you need a Savior and Lord. That's what the gospel is all about. It's about God giving sinners new hearts. God is in the spiritual heart transplant business.

**Ezekiel 36:26-27 (NLT)** ... “**And I will give you a new heart** with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony heart of sin and give you a new, obedient heart. [27] And I will put my Spirit in you so you will obey my laws and do whatever I command.”

**2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)** ... “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation**; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Only by trusting in Jesus Christ can you have a heart that is good and acceptable to God. Through Christ you are given the ability to live in a way that is good for you and one that brings glory to God.

**Luke 6:43-45 (NLT)** ...*“A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. [44] A tree is identified by the kind of fruit it produces. Figs never grow on thornbushes or grapes on bramble bushes. [45] A good person produces good deeds from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil deeds from an evil heart. Whatever is in your heart determines what you say.”*

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*Father, I know how wicked my heart used to be.  
Thank You for giving me a new heart.*

*LORD, please keep my heart clean and help me to bear good fruit that  
will bring you much glory.  
In Jesus name, Amen!*



## Make Me!

### Psalm 23:2

*“He makes me lie down in green pastures...”*

How many of us remember as kids growing up either saying, or having said to us; “You can’t make me!”

Usually this was in response to something the individual uttering those words just really did not want to do.

Perhaps it may have even been a child (surely no one that I know of....) spouting off those words to their parent who is trying to get them to do something that is ultimately for their own good, yet the child still thinks they don’t want to do whatever it is.

As we look at this first half of the second verse of Psalm 23, it is interesting to me that the passage reads;

*“He makes me lie down in green pastures...”*

Not; *“He allows me...”* or *“He lets me...”*  
But; *“He makes me...”*

Phillip Keller in his book *“A Shepherd Looks at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm”* makes this observation:

“The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very make-up it is almost impossible to *“make”* them lie down unless four requirements are met;

Owing to their timidity they refuse to lie down unless they are free from all fear.

Because of the social behavior within a flock sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with others of their kind.

If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when free of these pests can they relax.

Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel they are in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger.”

So in order for the sheep to be “made” to lie down, there must be a sense of freedom from fear, tensions, aggravations and hunger, and it is the shepherd who provides the remedy for all these anxieties. The shepherd is the one who provides protection, sense of purpose, healing and provision.

So it is with the Good Shepherd. The Apostle Paul reminds us in Philippians 4:19 that;

*“... God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”*

It is the Good Shepherd who protects us and gives us a purpose in Him. It is *“...by His stripes we are healed,”* and He is our provision;

*“Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry...””*  
(John 6:35)

The King James Version of this verse reads;  
*“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:”*

As His sheep, the Good Shepherd does not *“maketh”* or force us to *“lie down.”* Rather we have been created and provided for in such a way that we are *“made to,”* - we are actually *made for* the rest and security of His *“green pastures.”*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

## Restore

Psalm 23:3

*“He restoreth my soul...”*

There used to be a retail establishment just across the James River Bridge on Warwick Boulevard that I would visit from time to time. It was the Habitat for Humanity “ReStore.”

It was kind of like a thrift store for miscellaneous building materials, some furniture and even a few appliances. There was a hodgepodge of used, pre-owned or overstocked items that ended up in this store that benefitted the Habitat for Humanity charity.

And if you were fortunate you could find some real bargains as well as treasures there.

I really liked the name “ReStore” and thought it was very clever. All of the things for sale had at one time had a particular purpose or function, a value even, but had now ended up in this place as cast offs. Yet when found by just the right person, a particular item that had ended up in the “ReStore” could be “restored” to its original intent. The “cast offs” could be “restored.”

David, the author of Psalm 23 knew what it was like to feel “cast off,” or “cast down.” He writes in another Psalm, 42;

*“Why art thou cast down, O my soul?”* (Psalm 42:5)

As a shepherd himself, David also knew the significance of what it meant for a sheep to be “cast down” or “cast.”

“Cast” is a term that refers to a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up by itself. A “cast” sheep is a pathetic sight.

Here is how it generally happens: A heavy, fat or long fleeced sheep will lie down and get “comfortable” in a small hollow or depression in the ground. Then it may roll slightly to one side to stretch out or relax. Suddenly its center of gravity shifts such that it turns on its back to the point where its feet can now no longer touch the ground. And the sheep is “cast,” helpless.

The diligent shepherd keeps an eye out for cast sheep because he knows not only are they in this frantic, helpless state, but they are also vulnerable to predators.

The parallels with Christian life can be seen in the way that the Good Shepherd responds to His “cast” sheep. Many people have the notion that when a child of God falls - when they are “cast down” in a frantic, helpless spiritual dilemma - that God becomes disgusted, fed-up, or even furious with them. That God just says; “well, you got yourself into this state, let’s just see if you can get yourself out of it.”

But God’s Word comforts us with the truth that this way of thinking is simply not the case.

In Luke 15 Jesus shares the parable of the shepherd who, leaving the flock of 99, seeks out the one lost (perhaps “cast”) sheep. Often, when “cast” a sheep will cry out or bleat. Hearing this cry the shepherd can locate the lost sheep.

Again the Psalms offer this promise;

*“I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry.”* (Psalm 40:1)

The Good Shepherd promises to hear the cry of His wayward or “cast” sheep and return them to a place of fellowship and safety. *“He restoreth my soul...”*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

## Still Waters

Psalm 23:2b

*"He leadeth me beside the still waters."*

Sheep, like humans, need water to survive. Although they are sometimes found, and even thrive in a semi-arid country, they still need the life-giving resource of water.

The psalmist, himself a shepherd, knew the reality of this need. He also realized that the key to leading the flock to good water lies with the shepherd. He is the one who knows where the best drinking water can be found. He is the one who leads the flock to the good water.

If a human, or sheep, or really pretty much any animal is deprived of sufficient water then thirst is the natural response that occurs. Thirst lets the body know of its need for life-giving water.

Just as animals have a physical body that has a need and capacity for water, the human soul has a need and capacity for the spiritual fulfillment that is found only in and through a relationship with God through Christ - the "Living Water."

When sheep are thirsty and feel the need for water, they become restless and will often set out to find water, any water, in order to satisfy their thirst. If they are not "led" to the good, pure, clean water, they will drink from whatever water source is available. This may include polluted pot or mud holes where they can pick up germs or intestinal parasites.

It is a scriptural truth that mankind has been created with a thirst for the Spiritual. Man's insatiable desire for the eternal can be seen in the vast history of religions, pagan worship and human philosophy.

Saint Augustine summed it up when he wrote;

*"O God! Thou hast made us for Thyself and our souls are restless, searching."*

Sadly, humans will, like sheep, become restless and seek out their own spiritual water supply. Often this leads to drinking from the polluted pools of the world's offerings. In their quest to find something, anything, to fulfill their spiritual desire and void they will drink from any dirty water source. Though it may temporarily satisfy their thirst, drinking the impure water will inevitably lead to unhealthy spiritual consequences and ultimately a thirst that is never quenched - never satisfied.

But Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, has promised that souls that thirst for the pure water of His righteousness will be filled - will be satisfied;

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."* (satisfied) Matthew 5:6

At the great feast in Jerusalem He offered;

*"If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink."* John 7:37

And to the Samaritan woman at the well Jesus declared;

*"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."* John 4:13-14

Allow the Good Shepherd to lead you to the still, pure, and satisfying living water of His eternal presence.

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

# Trusting the authority of Jesus

*Luke 7:2-10*

On September 11, 2012 two government facilities in Benghazi, Libya were attacked by local extremists. The first site was a diplomatic outpost and about a mile away there was a second site, which was an operations center, pursuing intelligence and security. Because the diplomatic outpost was not officially a US Embassy, the policies and procedures for security were greatly reduced and the site was not technically considered US soil, as is the case for embassies.

As a result there was reduced security, a lag in military response, uncertainty as to who was allowed to do what, and to what extent; because of this, four people died, several more were wounded and both compounds collapsed. There was constant disagreement on who had what responsibility. The blame for that night and the pursuit for answers still continues to this day, nearly a decade later.

The one question that no one seems to know the answer to is, "Who had the authority to crush the attack?" When calls went out for help, the question, "What's your authorization?" was asked several times. The ones answering the call often said, "I don't have that authority."

**Luk 7:2-10 (highlights)** -- *There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him... So Jesus went with them... the centurion sent friends to say to him... "I do not deserve to have you come under my roof... But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me..." When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even*

*in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.*

The centurion was the commander over 100 men in a legion. A legion consisted of 6000 men. However, centurions had different ranks among themselves, each with more or less authority than others. This centurion could have only had 100 men under his watch or he could have been the *prima pilus*, who was the head centurion in a legion. This means that he could have had a seat at war councils. Either way, he described his understanding of authority (read the whole passage to gain a fuller understanding of his plea that amazed Jesus).

He would have recognized that Jesus had such authority that, unlike other healers he would have seen, Jesus could just say the word without seeing or touching or even being in the same space as the sick, and the illness would have to obey him! Remember that Jesus had people follow him and press against him and reach out to swipe at his robe, but this soldier just said, "You don't have to come to my house, you can just say the word."

The parallel passage in Matthew 8:5-13 describes the illness as paralysis and has Jesus assuring him that his servant has been healed.

What keeps you from fully trusting in Jesus' authority? Is he not greater than your worry? Can he not provide for you financially? Can he not work in hearts to restore relationships? Can he not heal disease? Of course he can do all those things and more! Rather than fretting how things will work out, call out to Jesus and ask him to exercise his authority.

*Thank you, Lord, for having authority over all things. Show me your goodness and power that I may trust more and more in your authority and rest in you. In Jesus perfect name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# As far as the yeast from the west

*Matthew 16:5-12*

Every Christmas Heather pulls out her recipes for our traditional Christmas eve dinner. It's not so much a dinner as it is a smorgasbord of our favorite holiday snacks: pigs in a blanket, jalapeno wraps, various chips and dips, meatballs... mmmm. Oh! Where was I?

Oh, yeah, the grocery store. The first time she asked me to help her shop for the ingredients, she added yeast to the list. I was surprised that it only came in a small envelope. Usually, because of our schedules, our bread is premade, but for special occasions, like Christmas, she will bake something that requires yeast. When I brought the groceries home I told her that was all I could find. She said I had got what she needed.

**Mat 16:5-12--** *5 When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. 6 "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 7 They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread." 8 Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? 9 Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 10 Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 11 How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 12 Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*

It wasn't until I actually saw the yeast I had purchased that I grasped Jesus' teaching that a little yeast works throughout the whole dough. I had always heard that it didn't take much, but I had no actual concept of what that looked like until I watched Heather sprinkle it into the rest of the ingredients and the result it had.

Jesus had a real problem with the religious leaders of his day. I imagine he has a real problem with a lot of the religious leaders of our day as well. There has been a great move toward Christian unity in recent history, but it has always come at the expense of truth. I have been reminded, even prompted, to revisit classic Christian authors who spoke of truth as if it were a real thing. In a recent podcast by John Cooper of Skillet and Alisa Childers, formerly of ZoeGirl. John made the statement to "read more dead guys."

While it's great to read current pastors, we have 2000 years of Christian history that we can lean on to help us grasp truth and strengthen our foundation. Of course, our primary resource of resisting yeast, is the Word of God. Getting to know the Scripture through reading it and studying it daily, paired with fervent, consistent prayer is ESSENTIAL! On top of that, reading classic Christian thinkers can be extremely helpful.

We live in a time when holding to absolute truth can be seen as hateful and bigoted. This is a western cultural concept. Do not surrender any ground to false teachings, even from those who bear the title of pastor, reverend, rabbi, or priest. Do not let even a grain of these lies penetrate your armor. Resist at all cost the yeast from the west.

*Thank you, Lord, for giving us Truth and giving us the Holy Spirit so we can understand it. Strengthen me to withstand lies, even those in a priest's robes. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Never Give Up!

I have been watching my yellow lab grow older. She is fourteen now. Her hips and shoulders don't work like they used to and I know she is in some pain. I have her on medication but it doesn't seem to be working like it was. I have asked but her Veterinarian won't let me increase the dose. She struggles to walk and it is hard for her to get up and down.

But every day ... when she sees me heading for the door ... she wants to go with me. She needs help getting into my truck and as of today, she needs help getting out. She can still climb the stairs, but now she needs help getting down. She loves to be with me. She's my friend and oh what an inspiration she is to me. She won't give up! LORD, help me to love like Izzy and be like Izzy.

**2 Corinthians 4:8-10 (NLT)** ...*“We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed and broken. We are perplexed, but we don’t give up and quit. [9] We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going. [10] Through suffering, these bodies of ours constantly share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.”*

No one is immune to suffering and problems. You can't live life without hurt and pain. Life can get tough, stress and pressure can increase, and there are times when you just want to throw in the towel and give up.

I am sure the apostle Paul had many of those kind of days. He

understood conflict, criticism, violence, and hatred. There were many threats on his life. He certainly knew what it was like to face severe trials and overwhelming difficulties.

There were even times in Paul's life when he went through seasons of doubt and discouragement. I am certain there were times when Paul thought about quitting and finding an easier way to live. But Paul was committed to finishing out his calling and he knew that for him to be successful, he had to rely on the presence and the promises of God.

b) Satan knows your weakness. He knows how to turn up the heat on your life so that you want to give up. He is a master at applying ungodly pressure. He knows how to make us feel like we are losing the battle.

That may be where you are at right now. Towel in hand ... ready to be thrown. ... Don't throw it! ... Don't quit! ... Don't give up!

One of my college professors used to say ... ***Don't quit! Don't go home! Stay one more day!*** Praise God, that was some good advice that helped a lot of students to graduate.

I want to encourage you to do the same. Trust God and stay the course. God will always give you what you need to get you to the end. He can help you finish well.

[illegible]

*Please help me LORD Jesus to stay focused on You and not my troubles. Help me to trust You instead of running in defeat. Thank You for Your faithfulness to me!*

# A new hope

*Romans 8:24-25*

In 1977 I stood in line with my father to get into the movies. In our small but growing town our cinema had just two theaters. I had been itching to see this movie since I had first heard about it. My step-mother had taken my brother and two sisters to see it the week before. I was supposed to go, but I had gotten in trouble, so as a seven-year-old you can imagine that the anticipation was killing me.

When we finally got inside and were able to make it through the concession stand, take our seats and watch yet another reminder that we really should visit the concession stand, I then had to tolerate a couple of movie trailers. Finally, the theater boomed with orchestral music and the words that have since become the iconic introduction to many films, scrolled up the screen against a backdrop of the vast vacuum of space:

Star Wars  
Episode IV: A New Hope

I was entranced in the story from the beginning. For almost 45 years I have enjoyed Star Wars, even the parts and characters I'm not so thrilled with. My wife and now my kids love it, too. And to imagine it all started with a hodge podge of characters: a smuggler and his furry co-pilot, a moisture farmer, a princess, a hermit war hero and two droids, one sarcastic who only spoke beeps and whistles, and the other multilingual and constantly irritated.

**Rom 8:24-25--** *24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

For the apostles and disciples, they had had a rough weekend, losing their teacher, friend and Lord. Then they

found out Sunday morning he was alive, but some were still skeptical. Now hope was building. Word had spread that the tomb was empty and Jesus was alive! He began to appear to individuals and groups and over the next forty days he would appear over and over again, building hope in the disciples: a new hope.

The disciples had a sense that more was coming. The resurrection of Jesus and the ongoing visitations with them before his ascension continually reassured them that he was alive and that their hope should be alive, too. Paul addressed it in Romans and then added that "hope that is seen is no hope at all." Hope requires an absence of the visual. It requires a trust that a thing will happen in the future, even if we do not, in the present, see how or when. David Guzik says, "The fulfillment of our redemption is something still distant, yet we hope for it in faith and perseverance, trusting that God is faithful to His word and the promised glory will be a reality."

When we go through difficult times, often the first thing to go is hope. "This will never end" or "I'm going to live with this forever" or "I can't beat this." In *Better Off Dead*, an '80s comedy, one girl said, "'I can't do it' is your middle name. I think you will find that confidence suits you." Having confidence in the Lord is exactly what hope is.

You don't have to trust that you have whatever it takes to beat what you're in. You don't have to depend on your own strength or will or connections or ingenuity. That is misplaced confidence. Instead, place your confidence in Christ, the source of our hope.

Do you need hope today, a fresh hope? A new hope? Trust in the Lord that his word is good and hope is on the way!

*Thank you, Lord, for being my hope. Help me to rest in you and to make you the source of my confidence. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**

# Knowing truth when we see it

1 John 2:1-2

Just a few days ago we remembered the sacrifice of Christ through the observance of Good Friday and celebrated the resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday. But is this just an annual celebration for us, or is it a daily celebration. I once heard a pastor say, “Live like Jesus died for you yesterday, resurrected this morning and is ascending tomorrow.” In other words, keep the work of Christ fresh and alive in your daily living, spend the day walking with Jesus.

We often fail to acknowledge what is truth, or more accurately, Who is Truth, bringing confusion upon ourselves and allowing confusion to reign in the hearts and minds of others, who could be free of their shackles if someone would only show them the Truth, that is, Christ.

**1Jo 2:1-2 NIV—** *1 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

As I am catching up on my podcasts from the last few days, I heard Andrew Klavan make a great point in his latest. He said that we live in a time when truth can be hard to recognize as truth, not that it stops being truth. Truth is true, whether we acknowledge it or not. He then made reference to Jesus calling himself the Truth, yet the

crowd, even those who had adored him even just days before, found themselves crying out for his crucifixion.

Even as they had recognized him as he walked among them, as they waved palm branches, shouting, “Hosanna!”, as they laid their coats in his path and asked him to heal their sick; when it came time to see the Truth for Who He was, they found themselves crying, “Crucify!”

What is it about the truth that makes it unappealing? It is accountability. It requires taking responsibility. Acknowledging that something is true requires us to respond with full knowledge that what we are doing is either right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral.

John tells us that sin is real and everyone sins, except God who “is light and in him is no darkness at all.” BUT we have an advocate, Jesus Christ, the “atoning sacrifice for our sins, and” (get this!) “not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

We live in a time where the very concept of truth is in question, and so many lies are embraced as truths and questionable issues as absolutes. It is time for us to announce that there is a Truth, his name is Jesus, and we are called to respond; not only us, but the whole world.

*Lord God, thank you that there is no darkness in you. Thank you for sending Jesus to take away our sins and to be an advocate for us. Help me to recognize, believe and proclaim the Truth. In the name of Jesus, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**



## No Fear

### Psalm 23:4

*"I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;"*

Way back in the 1990's a popular line of extreme sport clothing was the *"No Fear"* brand. The company was started by some dirt bike Motocross enthusiasts. However it wasn't until a popular rap artist just happened to be wearing one the *"No Fear"* logo caps during a CNN interview that the company exploded into a multimillion dollar business. Soon after that *"No Fear"* T-shirts, caps and hoodies could be seen most anywhere, not just on the motocross circuit.

The underling message of the brand was the idea of not living your life in fear, but rather trusting in one's self to make it through or succeed in whatever "extreme" sport or endeavor you were engaged in.

In this portion of verse 4 of Psalm 23 we see that David was actually the first proponent of a "No Fear" philosophy.

But recall, the psalmist is writing from the perspective of the sheep under the care of the Good Shepherd. He is not trusting in his own strength or even ability for deliverance from whatever particular *"evil"* he may be facing, but rather the promise of the Good Shepherd to be with him.

In this past year of pandemic we have seen many people living their lives in fear. With the constant media bombardment of "worst-case" scenarios, infection rates and death statistics one might even say it is understandable. COVID 19 has been with us for over a year now and it has indeed taken a toll on all of our lives in one way or another.

Though some might not categorize a virus as "evil" per se, it is nevertheless ultimately the result of living in a fallen world where our "sin-nature" bodies are susceptible to sickness and disease. And we know this "fall" originated with the evil one - Satan himself.

Jesus Christ, our "Good Shepherd" taught us to pray;  
*"deliver us from evil."* (Matthew 6:13 - KJV)

The actual Greek translation of this verse can read;  
*"deliver us from the evil one."*

The evil one is out there doing what he does; spreading fear and doubt in whatever way he can.

But Jesus also promises us;  
*"I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."*  
(Matthew 28:20)

Sheep can be notoriously skittish and fearful, and they do in fact have dangers that they must be aware of; predators, parasites and even disease can be a very real threat. The single most comforting factor to allay their fears is the presence of their shepherd, his physical presence, but also the sound of his voice. Again, Jesus reminds us that;

*"My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me."*  
(John 10:27)

As we hear and follow the voice of our Good Shepherd through whatever *"evil"* confronts us, may we be able to say with the psalmist;

*"I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;"*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

## The Valley

Psalm 23:4

*“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the  
shadow of death”*

The first stanza of the hymn titled “Higher Ground” goes like this:

*I’m pressing on the upward way,  
New heights I’m gaining everyday.  
Still praying as I onward bound,  
Lord plant my feet on higher ground.*

Higher ground...

In the Christian life we may talk about wanting to move on to higher ground with God. We desire those “mountaintop” experiences with Him where we can dwell above the lowlands of life.

But often we may have a flawed understanding of how we are to get to the “higher ground,” the place of intimate fellowship with God. Sometimes we may imagine that we can just somehow be “air-lifted” onto higher ground.

As a shepherd, David knew the importance of moving his flock to the high ground during certain times of the year. There the freshest forage could be found after the grazing areas had been given a season of rest.

David also knew that the best route to the high ground was up through the valleys. Every mountain has its valleys; ravines and gulches that scar its sides, yet offer a more gradual ascent to the top. And in these valleys there may indeed be real danger, the “shadow of death” even.

Among the ravines and crevasses of the valley predators may lie in wait for the passing flock. But the shepherd does not merely *send* the flock to higher ground, he *leads* them “*through the valley*” to the high ground. He is with them in and through the valley.

The shepherd also knows that within these valleys run the streams where the freshest, sweetest waters can be found. So even though the dangers may be very real, the life giving, life sustaining resource is always close at hand.

And so it is with our Christian walk. Our Good Shepherd knows that we need the fresh forage of His presence as we dwell with Him in the high ground. As with the sheep, often our route to that place of intimate fellowship leads through the valleys of life.

Hardships, unfortunate or disastrous events can be found in these valleys. The prospect of danger or even death is a reality.

Yet, our Good Shepherd promises to be with us;  
*“I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”*  
(Matthew 28:20)

Our Good Shepherd walks with us “*through the valley.*” And our Good Shepherd knows that even amidst the hardships, the disasters, and yes, even through the “*shadow of death*” we can drink in the life-sustaining waters of His Spirit, His living, eternal water.

To get to the high ground we must go through the valley. The question for us is not; will there be valleys, or even whether our valleys will be many or few? The question for us is: Will we trust the guidance of our Good Shepherd and drink in the sweetness and presence of His Living Water?

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

## The Right Path

Psalm 23: 3

*“He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”*

It has been said that sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves they will over-graze a hillside or pasture until it is practically a barren wasteland. They will pollute their own grounds and water areas with disease and parasites.

A common misconception is that sheep can just “get along” or “do ok” just anywhere, but without the constant and guiding attention of the responsible shepherd both the sheep and their habitat will suffer.

Another trait of sheep is that they will follow the same paths until they become ruts. What were once just trails on a hillside become washed-out gullies. The familiar path, the “comfortable” route, actually becomes an avenue of danger.

Again, it is the shepherd who ensures that his sheep are protected from these pitfalls and dangers, and the greatest safeguard that the shepherd has is leading the flock himself - keeping them on the move. But this movement must be in accordance with a predetermined plan.

The kind of plan David the shepherd no doubt had in mind when he wrote of being led in *“paths of righteousness.”*

A plan that will safeguard the flock, but also the good name and reputation of the shepherd.

Our own behavior patterns can be so similar to sheep that it is no wonder God so often chose to refer humans as... sheep.

Phillip Keller comments that:

*“Just as sheep will blindly, habitually, stupidly follow one another along the same little trails until they become ruts that erode into gigantic gullies, so we humans cling to the same habits that we have seen ruin other lives.*

Proverbs 14:12 reminds us that;

*“There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.”*

That way that *“seemeth right unto a man”* (or woman) may just be the way we have always gone - specifically: our own way. We don’t want to be led off of our own path of familiarity, even when that path turns into the road that leads to death and destruction.

But the Good Shepherd desires, and promises, to lead us in *“the paths of righteousness”* - His direction, His path, His... “way.”

The Good Shepherd came proclaiming *“I am the way, the truth, and the life...”* (John 14:6)

His *“path of righteousness”* is in fact life, eternal life, by and *“for His name’s sake.”*

**-Pastor Ronnie Bunch**

# Waiting, but not sitting

*Titus 2:11-13*

There is little more annoying than sitting and waiting. Lots of us try to keep busy just to keep from sitting and waiting. Waiting for the results of a medical test, the beginning stages of labor and waiting for it to progress to birth, sitting in the emergency room waiting to be seen, all bring a sense of anticipation. The worst part is that there is nothing else you can do as you wait.

When I was in seminary I got a job working at a warehouse, unloading and loading trucks and eventually taking a second shift driving and delivering. When I first started we had several temporary employees that worked overnight on the same shift, 2a-7a. After a couple of months we got a new supervisor, but also new employees and the crew became entirely seminary students, those preparing for ministry. Our responsibility was simple: unload the big truck, divide the freight up for the smaller trucks, then load the smaller trucks.

Eventually we became so efficient that we had about two hours between the time everything was finished and the end of shift. So we began taking on new responsibilities for ourselves. We looked for old, lost freight, we swept the warehouse, we stacked pallets. Of course we also played baseball with a ball of shrink wrap and a board from a pallet.

**Tit 2:11-13 NIV—** *11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. 12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope--the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...*

For the past 2000 years we have been waiting for the blessed hope, the return appearance of Christ. But we are not told to sit and wait. We are told to “say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions” and to live godly lives. Our refusal to follow worldly passions and our insistence on living in godliness will invariably draw attention. There will be many who will oppose our efforts, but there will be those who are drawn to Christ by the example of his followers.

The church began losing its effectiveness in the 1970s and 80s when it began to feel less like “church” and reduced teaching convicting truths in order to seem less judgmental. This is a traceable fact. Now there is a resurgence in young adults and teens toward traditional faith because it is different enough from the world that it is worth pursuing.

Rather than avoiding open proclamation of Christ and rather than hiding the truths of his identity and teaching, let us live lives reflecting his glory, let us refuse to follow our own desires, let us deny worldly passions and instead let us work toward the growth of his kingdom as we wait for his return.

Our supervisor at the warehouse was Ken. Ken was not kind to Christians. He didn’t like them and had a bad history with them when he returned from Vietnam. Imagine his dismay at having an entire team staffed by pastors in training and imagine our dismay at working under a man who made no bones about how he felt about us. After a few months of working with us, watching us work, listening to us talk and laugh and even submit with respect to a man who didn’t like us, Ken said. “I’ve worked with a lot of men over the years, but if I could choose my own team, they would all be pastors.”

*Lord God, thank you for choosing flawed people like me to reflect your glory. Help me to work, live and speak well as I await your return. In the name of Jesus, amen.*

**Pastor Art Stafford**