

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

— Jeremiah 17:7-8, ESV

A Tree Planted By Water

Writings from nine years of drought and rain

Zach Heern · 46 writings, 2017–2026

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2016–2019

Gainesville and the Plant

We moved across the country to help plant a church, and I spent these years learning that ministry, marriage, and my own faith were all a lot messier than I expected them to be.

8 Things I've Learned About Church-Planting

March 15, 2017

It's rapidly approaching the 6-month mark since my wife and I packed up our family and moved to help plant a church in Gainesville. That number is hard to believe. It seems like it was just yesterday that we felt God's leading to move across the country. In this 6 months, I have compiled a list of a few things I've learned (in no particular order) so far about Church-planting...

1. **Greater Ownership** – You have greater stock/ownership (or at least perceived) of what happens (or doesn't happen) in a small, infant church. The needs are vast. Not just physical needs, but the need for the power of the Holy Spirit. There's a lot heavier load to carry and you find out real fast how serious you are about it. It forces you to either press in and pray fervently for God's help or to bail on the next exit ramp. So far I haven't bailed.
2. **High Risk and High Rewards** – We are supposed to "count the cost" of being a disciple. The cost (risk) is much, but the rewards are high. Those who seek to preserve their life will lose it, but for those who lose their life for Jesus' sake, will find it (Matt. 10:39). Thus far, moving to Gainesville has costed me somewhere around \$8,000. That number is increasing as we're still waiting to sell our home. My kids have struggled at their new school in more ways than one...They miss their grandparents, family, and friends back in the Midwest...My Dad has a rare liver disease and has to have a transplant. I can't enjoy already limited time with him. Yet, I don't regret my decision. I may not even get the ultimate reward in this life, but even in the present order I get to see people's eyes opened to the light of the knowledge of the glory of Christ.
3. **Christians are Strange** – We really are strangers and aliens in this world. Paul even said he was considered to be refuse to the world (1 Corinth. 4:13). We truly believe remarkable and foreign things to a dying world that is passing away. Sometimes I think what I believe and am doing is totally crazy! And yet, I see this is very biblical.

It is foolishness to those who are perishing. And yet the Gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16).

“We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything” – 2 Corinth. 6:8-10

4. People are Messy (Including Me) – We’re all messy to some extent. What is normal? I’ve often wondered what ‘normal’ actually looks like. Sometimes I think we spend too much time trying to make sure we look all put-together. Well, I hate to break it to you, but we’re not. I struggle so often with perfectionism (thinking I need to have a spotless car, a spotless house, perfect kids, get up at 4am to read the Bible for 3 hours while listening to a Jonathan Edwards audio book, etc., etc.). Just admit that we’re at least kinda messy. Maybe not as messy as we were when Jesus first saved us, but still a bit messy. Whenever the burden of perfectionism starts creeping in, I just remind myself of Psalm 23...He makes us lie down in green pastures, he leads us beside still waters. Messy people makes for messy lives. This spills over into relationships. Let grace abound. I had a leader who is also a dear friend that used to say, “we’re not here to fix each other.” Stressing out over being put together all the time is NOT Christianity. The world does that, and it does NOT require the Holy Spirit.

5. I Don’t Like Board Games – This one isn’t really a new development for me. A lot of people like to get together to play board games, particularly the one’s with 15 different pieces that require a college course to learn all the rules. However, relationship tends to happen over board games and if it means I can connect with people doing something they enjoy, I’ll play board games every day.

6. **I Suck at Remembering Names** – Also, not necessarily a new development. Being on a church plant certainly magnifies this shortcoming though. Thankfully, there's a lot of people named Andrew at the church I attend, so I have a pretty good chance if I just guess Andrew.

7. **I Care Too Much About Approval of Man** – This also relates back to #4, but being on a church plant tends to bring everything to the surface (good or bad) as far as struggles and unhealthy patterns. They come out of the woodwork. There's a feeling of having to "prove yourself all over again" to a new group of people. Prove what exactly—how awesome I am? I'm not sure. And we're never as awesome as we think we are (Rom. 12:3).

8. **Jesus Builds His Church** – I am convinced there's nothing too special about us. It's amazing the type of people Jesus chooses to build his church (no offense, I'm also speaking about myself here). There's great hope and confidence in this fact. It takes a lot of the burden off ourselves and lowers the stakes a bit on our part. Sometimes I take myself too seriously.

POSTSCRIPT, 2026

I stayed almost nine years. There was a hotel conference room, then a movie theater, then my dad's death, then a permanent building, then COVID, then church network controversy, then a brain tumor, then a divorce I never saw coming. I left the church I helped plant in 2025, on good terms, mostly so I could rebuild my life on my own. Most of this list still holds up, especially the last one. Whatever got built there, it was never really riding on me.

Step 2: Buy a House...

March 20, 2017

Just to preface, these are only my opinions on things. You could apply that to everything I post here. I want to share a few of my observations on cars before I start talking about buying a house, just because it's fresh on my mind. We are so dependent on cars in our society. They are almost a necessity. As a result, we spend A LOT of money on them. Not just on the actual cost of buying them, but the maintenance, the insurance, the gas, and yes, accidents! I have kind of learned to laugh about it, but it seems like for Theresa and I, we have to take one of our cars to the body shop for repairs about every 6 months. I kid you not, when we go a 6-month stretch without being hit, taking out a deer, or without backing into something, I start waiting for the shoe to drop.

Cars, as useful and necessary as they are, bring a lot of stress into our lives. I've observed it not only in my own life, but in many others as well. We just had an issue with our car this week where it sustained some minor damage from an accident. This came on the coat tails of spending a few hundred bucks on some maintenance on the very same car. It just had me thinking back over my life about how much time, energy, and money cars have eaten up. We're not talking about Ferrari's here either, but normal, average cars. I'm not really certain there's much of a way around it unless we biked or walked everywhere (which sounds even more stressful than owning a car), but it's interesting that cars have such an impact on our day-to-day, even our livelihood.

The second car I ever owned was a 1997 Dodge Dakota pick-up when I was in High School. I bought it used for about \$7,000 and made payments of my own through a part-time job. As fun as that truck was to drive, it made up for it in the problems it gave me. It was a real money-pit. Two different times, Theresa and I (who were dating at the time) were stranded on the side of the highway because it broke down. The first incident was when the transmission went out (in the middle of January) and the second time, the fuel pump went out (on the 4th of July). You can just imagine what the cost of those repairs

was. Every couple months something else would go out (a sensor, a hose, the radiator, etc.). It got to the point where I joked (I see a pattern here) because literally every part had been replaced, so there was nothing left to go out.

As a Christian, I like to think closely about what impact's the Mission in a negative way. Everything we do, especially in buying and selling, should be done with the Mission in mind. I know there are many aspects of my life that are still very similar to non-Christians. I watch many of the same shows and movies, complain about many of the same things, and buy/sell in very similar ways. I would say I'm gradually changing in many of these behaviors, but there are still parts of me that almost enjoy living in such a way. Much of the financial stress (and therefore most of my total stress) comes from cars and houses and indebtedness (i.e, student loans). These things are so normalized in our culture that I wonder if it has created a blind-spot for many Christians? I would love to be debt free. The borrower is slave to the lender (Prov. 22:7).

I can say with 100% certainty that (maybe sometimes unnecessary) financial obligations have been an obstacle of the Mission in my own life. Usually it keeps me from being able to give as abundantly as I want to or could have. These days we are slowly on the road to living below our means. Not just for the sake of living below our means so we can sit around and talk about how awesome we are, but so that we can have something to offer or give. I believe God has called us to be a people that live in such a way; not trying to keep up with the Jones', like the world.

Do we really need to get into \$60,000 worth of debt to get 4-year Philosophy degrees? Or spend \$10,000 over 5 years for a timeshare, which is basically a glorified hotel room that we "own," but don't really and end up selling it because we never use it? These are questions I ask myself as I keep getting older and I think they're worth asking. I'm not saying there's anything inherently wrong with these kinds of life things. If you go to Branson to see Wayne Newton's grandson sing show tunes every summer, then by all means, invest in a timeshare. However, these things are worth considering.

As Theresa and I search for a house here in Gainesville, my hope is that we do so in light of these things. Here's to hoping we don't walk into a house and choose with our impulses (because we just have to have that awesome fireplace!) and pay \$50,000 over our price range. And even if we do buy the house with the awesome fireplace that's \$50,000 over our price range, I'm thankful for God's grace in all of life's things and I can be thankful for everything he's given us. He's not out to suck the fun out of our lives, but it's good to remember that the real fun awaits us in the next life.

"1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia,

2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord,

4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints-

5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us." – 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

Slow Down

March 27, 2017

Growing up, I was the youngest. My only brother is 7 years older than me, and I am the youngest of 5 cousins. Obviously, there are a lot of negative perceptions (is that the word I'm looking for?) surrounding the "youngest." The youngest is usually viewed as the one who is most spoiled and gets away with everything. There may be some anecdotal evidence that suggests that, but who knows. Being the youngest, I remember always wanting to be on the same playing field as those at least a half a decade ahead of me. When I was 5, I wanted to be a teenager. When I was a teenager, I wanted to be a young 20-something. In my early-20s, I wanted to be 30. Now in my late-20s, I finally feel content where I am and actually feel the opposite desires kicking in of wanting to slow my aging down. My hair's thinning, my metabolism is noticeably slower, and I actually get sore randomly. I would kind of like my life to slow down a bit. I'm still young by the standard of many, but I am still much different than I was when I was 20. I have observed a few deceptive/unhealthy ways of thinking in myself growing up and so I would like to shed some light on them.

When you're young, people don't take you seriously. This bothered me.

Growing up, and until the last couple years, I always wanted to be older because I thought only then would people take me seriously. I think there's actually a lot of truth in saying that a lot of adults don't take youth very seriously. I didn't like that. This bothered me. Far too much. It created discontentment in me. It made me want to rush to the next step. This pattern of thinking carried through into adulthood. I would reach a benchmark, thinking then I would be content, but I wasn't. I was always looking to the next one.

This is Vanity

Theresa and I got married when we were in High School. Once we were married, career became the focus for me, so it was "go to college, and join the military to pay for it,

because you're too good to spend the first 2 years in Community College." Once I was a Freshman in college, I wanted to be a Senior. Once I was a Senior, I wanted to be a grad student. Once I was a grad student, I wanted to be a professional. Once I was a professional, I thought gee, this actually kinda sucks. You mean I have to work 40+ hours a week with maybe two weeks off a whole year (if I'm lucky), and 95% of this money goes towards stuff that doesn't bring me any enjoyment? And I have to do this for at least 40 years and then spend my last 10-15 years of life with the freedom to do anything I want at a time in my life when I'm least able to enjoy it (to paraphrase John Piper)? Sounds kinda funny when you say it in that way, but there's actually a lot of truth to it. It's not pessimism, it's just sort of the way the world works. You don't have to try to think positively and say, "this is great," when no, maybe it actually isn't. It's a pretty evil thing to pretend everything is great, when it actually isn't. You can fake that positivity for a little while, but eventually that bubble is going to burst and you will find yourself lost and depressed. I could retire and then die within a year. It happens. Everyday.

Ok, now what then? Is that it? For some it is. For the non-Christian, that's as good as life will ever be. Good times will still be had in the midst of life. But for the Christian, this life is as bad as it gets, and that's comforting. Now don't get me wrong, God intended for us to work and work was good at one time and will again be redeemed, so work is not an evil thing. It has simply become cursed as a result of the Fall. There are some days, even now though, where I find work rewarding. It's not all bad, all the time. However, in this world there is both good experiences and awful experiences happening at the same time. One person is happy about their promotion, and some place else another is grieving the loss of a loved one. In one place a couple is getting married, and somewhere else, at the exact same time, a couple is getting a divorce. Somewhere, somebody is eating a big steak, and somewhere else, someone is starving to death. There is the ability to experience great pleasure and joy in this life as well as great suffering and depression.

In Summary

If you find yourself to be like me in always looking to the next thing (a wedding, a big move, a promotion, a bigger house, a stronger max on bench press, etc.); try to slow down. Maybe not on your own power, but with God's help. If you're regularly thinking, "If I could just get through/beyond X and get to Y, life would be great" then you may have an unhealthy pattern of thinking. How long can you go without changing a job, or moving, or having another kid, or XYZ? Do you willingly change major life circumstances every 6 months or a year? I believe this is a very big deal. In my own experience and in witnessing this in others, you set yourself up for a lot of heartache. You will find yourself disappointed frequently and in seasons of self-pity. It's vanity and pride at the heart of it. I speak to myself in this as well. I really don't like cliché's, but there's the old adage "The grass is always greener on the other side." And then people get all crafty and say things like "The grass is green where you water it." I get what they're trying to say, but it's too bumper-stickery for me.

I have had to learn to slow down a bit. I live in an apartment right now and some days I'll admit, it gets to me. I look forward to living in a house again, but I actually feel fairly content. Who says I can't just enjoy and rest in my current season? Having a house isn't really going to be that great, especially after the freshness wears off. I think Jesus has really been doing a work in me. I love my job, even though it's not where I "pictured myself" in my younger days. I have enough to pay my bills, but I'm not going to afford Disney World anytime soon. I don't think The reason I feel content is because I have finally made it, or arrived at some desired benchmark. I think it's just something Jesus has done in me. You can be content, even without circumstances changing, if the Holy Spirit does a work in you. You don't have to wait for them to change. There's nothing otherworldly about waiting on your circumstances to change before you can be content. I'm no longer anxious at night. I fall asleep in about 3 minutes. I know I am where I'm supposed to be and my wife actually "likes me" again. I don't feel content because everything in my life is all buttoned-up and easy. I could write a couple more paragraphs about things that are currently difficult. I also don't feel content because I'm trying to think positively and see the glass as half-full. I just know there is something greater, beyond the grave and it wasn't

flesh and blood that revealed this to me (Matt. 16:17). Life doesn't have to suck all the time, even when it sucks all the time.

Handling Disappointment

April 6, 2017

Have you ever been disappointed? Of course you have. Disappointing things happen in life. Almost everyday. You don't get the job you were hoping for, your friends or family let you down, plans fall through; the vacation you were really looking forward to gets rained-out the whole time; the buyers for your house back out of the contract; what started as good news becomes bad news, etc. Getting your hopes up, to then have that hope dashed to pieces, is painful. In this life, disappointment is inevitable, so what do we do as it comes up? I'm still learning when it comes to this. With everything in life, the only thing I know how to do is go to the Bible. I could share a bunch of verses that relate, but I'm just going to share some of my experiences (which I know is dangerous, so test it). Here are some observations from my own life that I hope you will find to be oddly encouraging:

Try not to over-analyze

I know at least for me, I tend to over-analyze or read into things a little too much. I sort of "egg on" my emotions with my thoughts. I kind of think of it like a petty elementary school confrontation that goes on in my mind with my thoughts and emotions. It's like one kid says to the other, "your momma's ugly!" And the other kid says, "did you just say my momma's ugly?" And you've got everyone on the play ground gathered around instigating saying, "Yeah, he did call your momma ugly," and before you know it, a brawl ensues. Maybe the kid said something else entirely, but it escalates quickly and is blown out of proportion. It goes from something small to becoming a big monster. Once this happens, it's pretty hard for me to talk myself off the ledge. It buries in like a tick and it's hard to undo those feelings. Sometimes it may not even just be your own thoughts, but it could be the enemy. In either case, it's important to recognize it and guard your heart before the fire gets stoked.

Try not to retreat

I know for me, I tend to want to isolate whenever disappointment happens, especially if it's a season of disappointment where it's like a machine gun of one thing after another. Have you ever said, "I'm done. I give up. I try all the time and stuff still sucks, so I'm just going to quit." My FB newsfeed is littered with memes and statuses like this. It's this, "I'm just going to do me from now on" type of mindset. Some people combat this stuff with positive thinking and self-help stuff, but even that falls flat eventually. Positive thinking in the midst of disappointment sounds somewhat like this (name that movie quote):

"My life is good, really good! I get to wake up every day at 5am and make some soup. I get to lay in my bed all alone all of my life. It's fantastic!"

It's hard to press through disappointment, especially when "retreating" or "washing your hands" of things seems justified. Doing that just leads to bitterness and resentment. The only thing I know to do is fight it. The way to fight might look a little different for everybody, but the main way I fight is through prayer and scripture. It's nothing too fancy or complicated. Also, I try not to wear myself out too much by trying to find some grand "meaning" or "reason" for the disappointment as I fight, which is a nice segue...

I'm grateful for some of my past disappointments

I look back on some disappointing life events, and can now see that it was actually God's goodness. At the time it was just disappointment. Maybe that meaning that I was seeking to find in the beginning was not something that I could discern until quite a while later. Sometimes we never find some grand meaning on this side of heaven and I'm ok with that. I remember a couple years ago when Theresa and I were praying about a big cross-country move to be a part of a team of people who were planting a church. We felt faith for it and really wanted it badly. We even thought it was for sure going to happen, but it didn't. I remember that was painful. It stung quite a bit. It was DISAPPOINTING. But by God's grace, we pressed on and now a few years later, God has planted us somewhere else when the timing was better and in hindsight, it's a much better fit than the other move would have been. It's just one example of many throughout my life. I used to have a leader who would regularly say (and mean it), "I'm glad God doesn't always give me what I want." This

really stuck with me over the last couple years because there's just so much truth in it. Sometimes I am kicking and screaming to get my way and yet even then, God has grace on me and does not let me have it. It's comforting to know, that even when I get in that place where I'm faithless and can't just "press through," on my own strength, he's going to keep me. He's going to shepherd me. Making it to the end will not be because of me and my inherent faithfulness. He will have new mercies for me every morning.

Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth." – Hosea 6:3

POSTSCRIPT, 2026

I wrote this about a move that didn't happen and called it disappointing. I didn't know yet what I'd eventually call disappointing: a marriage, a plan for my whole life, twenty years of doing what I understood to be the right things. I don't have the tidy "it was for my good, and now I see why" ending this post reached for. Some of it I still can't see the reason for. I'm choosing to believe Hosea 6:3 anyway, not because I've got it figured out, but because the alternative is worse.

Don't Sweat the Ordinary

April 14, 2017

"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit." – Jeremiah 17:7-8

The overall theme of this blog is to be rooted in Jeremiah 17:7-8. Most of my topics will orbit around this scripture in one way or another. Obviously, my life is ultimately about glorifying Jesus by enjoying him forever, but I pray (almost daily) to live a life of faithful, joyful perseverance. That not only would I endure in my faith until my final breath, but that I would do well—bearing fruit 30, 60, and 100-fold.

I realize that the vast majority of this faithful service and perseverance will occur in the context of the most ordinary parts of my daily life. Most days will be pretty ordinary and unremarkable as far as crazy, spiritual stuff going down. It's not that I don't still have high expectations for God's power in my daily life, but even Moses had to come down from the mountaintop to be with those stubborn Israelites. In the Christian life we get glimpses and great moments of God's presence or manifestation, but most of our days are just ordinary: flossing your teeth, taking multivitamins, getting the kids off to school, sitting in traffic, working, sitting in traffic again, dinner, homework, showers, 2 hours of spouse time, bedtime, and repeat. I get a few moments here and there throughout the day where I can get in the Bible, worship, and whistle-up a few prayers. Sure, time can be made to do those things for an extended amount of time, but some days (maybe a lot of days?) I just have to squeeze them in every chance I get throughout the day. There's nothing too glamorous or "exciting" about any of that.

Now, I'm not using those necessary daily life activities as an excuse for a lack in zeal or joy or affections or missional work. As Christians, we ought to be joy-filled, Christ-exalting, zealous, walking-by-the-Spirit people. If we just settle in without expecting much in terms

of God's Presence in our ordinary, daily lives, we run the possibility of becoming kind of jaded or crispy. The other side of that is if we become thrill-seekers, it's possible we could run out of gas; maybe not permanently, but at least for a time or a season—making us ineffective. I've just learned over time that faithful, Christ-following Christianity seems to happen within the context of our unremarkable daily lives.

The cool thing is that being a spiritual people in the context of our ordinary daily lives IS a result of God's Presence in our lives. Even something as unglamorous as self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. This is where the real Christ-following occurs. It's easy to be passionate and follow Christ when you're on the mountaintop. Even unbelievers will bow and confess when they're in God's Presence on that day. The real tested genuineness of our faith is in the 98% of the time where life is ordinary, busy, and mundane. For the saved sinner, the Holy Spirit dwells within us. We may not look out the window at night to see a pillar of fire or be led by a pillar of cloud by day, but we actually get something better—the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?...” – 1 Corinthians 6:19

As an aside, I hate that I have yet to be completely blown away by that fact. I don't think I will ever truly get the gravity of that on this side of Heaven. So where am I going with all this talk...I've found myself getting frustrated lately about a perceived lack of God's Presence in my life. I say perceived, because God is actually present. I just expect the walls to fall down every night, which isn't unrealistic (I hope for it and expect it), but whether those things happen or don't happen every night, I must press on. Waiting. Hoping. Praying. I so desperately need His Presence! I made a recent trip back to Southern Illinois a few weeks ago and it felt like God's Presence could just be turned on like a faucet. I had always heard that you can feel a discernable difference when you leave the Midwest in terms of the spiritual climate. It's true. Some places are like deserts. I have to work 2-3x harder since living in Florida as far as cultivating God's Presence in my daily life. I love it here, but it's more work. Nonetheless, I know Jesus will build His Church on the backs of

ordinary Christians living ordinary lives. He has for centuries and he will until the sky rolls back as a scroll. I don't mean ordinary as far as looking like everyone else, but ordinary as in working, eating, breathing, and sleeping. Stuff that everyone must do! But there will be many that come after us and come to know Jesus as a result of us paving the way through faithful service and prayer, in the context of ordinary life, day-in and day-out; if we don't give up.

“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” – Galatians 6:9

Happy Easter!!!

What do you do for Fun?

April 23, 2017

What do you do for Fun?

I get asked this question a lot. I also find myself asking the question quite frequently: What do you do for fun? Have you ever NOT been able to answer that or have you had a long pause when asked? It's like, man you just put me on the spot and all with that question. It's like you asked me what I think about politics or something. I still don't think I can confidently answer this question, but I think I'm getting somewhere. I want to be like, "Yeah, you know, I hike Mt. Everest on weekends and throw in the occasional spear-fishing trip along with extreme volley-ball-mountain-climbing..." I think there's a lot of expectation in our culture. You see people with "Salt Life" (or Swamp Life if you're in Gainesville) bumper stickers, hunting stickers, CrossFit-fanatics, etc. And those things are great and I'm not knocking on them by any means. The beach is fun, and I don't really like hunting or exercise, but that's cool if you're into that sort of thing.

What if your life isn't "Fun?"

So what if your life isn't really that "fun?" Well maybe it actually is and you just have the wrong idea of fun. I would also say that life is about more than just having fun. However, I think it's important to find at least one thing you can enjoy that gives you a break from the rigors of day-to-day life and missional work (if you're a Christian) and no, that doesn't entail reading your Bible more (though you should and it is also a lot of fun...most days). It's not a matter of just finding something to do for fun just for the sake of doing something fun. I am still learning how to have fun. I would say Theresa and I have always enjoyed traveling. That's probably the biggest fun thing we do. We like going on trips, even if they're just day trips. Outside of that, I would say we enjoy sleeping and eating. Those two activities make for a pretty fun day to me.

Learning How to have Fun again...

I have been pressing myself on this for about the last year. Somewhere over time (getting married, having kids, busyness, responsibilities, work, etc.) I have forgotten how to have fun! How does a person forget how to have fun? I've had to learn learn again. Having fun doesn't mean I have to shift my priorities. I think having fun is a way of rest for me. It's pretty clear in the Bible how important it is to rest (Genesis 2:2-3; Psalm 23:1-2; Hebrews 4, etc.). I mean, a saved Christian even enters God's "rest" (Heb. 4). I get too serious sometimes (a lot) and so caught up in stuff that "has to be done." Theresa has really helped me learn how to have fun again (she will break out dancing in public if she hears a good song or run around in the rain with the kids). Sometimes I'm all over here like, "You kids better not get all muddy and track that stuff in the house!" It's kind of comical how un-fun I can be sometimes. I even realize it in the moment too. I'll think, "Man, you're kind of being a jerk right now." I think many of us get this way sometimes, so I'm not just trying to pick on myself here.

Find your Cedar Key

Let me change gears a bit. There's a really neat place about an hour from us on the Gulf Coast of Florida called Cedar Key. It's a small fishing village and it isn't anything glamorous like Clearwater Beach or St. Augustine. But that's one of the things I like about it. It's more of a local spot if you will. Theresa, the kids, and I just love going out there. There's a small little beach and playground along with a few seafood restaurants, a community garden, and some docks for fishing. If you have ever been to the Florida Keys, it reminds me of them. There are several other little keys surrounding Cedar Key that you can kayak to over a pretty short distance. The waters are extremely calm so it's as smooth as being on a lake. Theresa and I have been talking about getting our own kayaks so we can start kayaking out there and other places around Gainesville (there are tons of pristine springs, rivers, and lakes). We may even take up fishing. I'm not an outdoors person, but there's so much to do recreationally in Florida (besides drugs) that it's hard not to want to get outdoors. Especially since the weather is perfect 7-8 months out of the year.

Having Fun isn't the Goal of Life

I write this (and this applies to everything I write in this blog) to encourage. Especially for any who are in that spot where maybe you forgot how to have fun. The rigors of life and responsibility have seeped in and you don't know what it means to have fun anymore. It's not a place to fret. It happens. Life is about much more than having fun. That's not the overall goal of life, unlike the YOLO movement would have you believe. But God hasn't called Christians to be bored, merely persevering people. I actually think God uses our hobbies, fun activities, etc. as a means of building relationship with people, especially unbelievers. If you rock climb, take someone rock climbing with you. If you hunt, take someone hunting with you. If you like eating, take someone eating with you. Have some fun!

Nostalgia

May 18, 2017

I heard a few Sugar Ray songs the other day for the first time in awhile and I felt a little nostalgic. Depending on which decade you grew up in, you probably have a handful of songs particular to that era that bring back memories from your childhood or teenage years (good or bad, right?). Nostalgia is a powerful thing and, at least for me, it tends to manifest itself most often while listening to music. I say that it's powerful for at least a few reasons. First, it can skew reality. It can often make the past seem better than it actually was. Second, it can cause you to want to "re-live" an experience, good or bad. It can cause you to re-think your life and question how you ended up where you are currently. Third, in relation to 1 and 2, it has the potential to bring about either contentment or discontentment. I will say historically, I have viewed nostalgia as being an overall "negative" thing. However, recently I have found myself re-thinking that notion. Maybe nostalgia has the potential to be beneficial for a person, especially the Christian? I actually think nostalgia is "neutral," much like money and the internet. I could be wrong (I'm no expert), so here are just a few of my thoughts on nostalgia.

When Can Nostalgia be Harmful?

I will answer this question with my own life experiences, to start. I went through a very tumultuous season of life about 5 years ago. Much of the tumult in my life was due to my own poor decisions, but it was still an awful season nonetheless. I medicated myself through substance abuse in order to ease my discomfort during this season. I wanted to escape reality. I kept this very secretive for the most part. It was my own way of just dealing with things. Many of these past memories are burned in my mind, though by God's grace, some of them no longer linger. It's not super-often anymore, but I would say at least a few times a year, I will have moments of nostalgia that will trigger these past memories and paint them as "pleasant," "enjoyable," "the good 'ole days," etc. It can be tempting in the moment to want to re-create or try to relive those experiences. In this

case, nostalgia is a bad deal and I have seen it cause many, especially those with past addictions, to struggle.

In a funny way, Uncle Rico from Napoleon Dynamite comes to mind when I think about this. If you don't know who or what either of those things are, you haven't lived! I'm kidding. Uncle Rico is a very stupid character from a very stupid (albeit it one of my favorite) movie, Napoleon Dynamite. "If coach would have put me in the 4th quarter, everything would be different. We would have went to state. I would have gone pro. Right now, I'd be soaking it up in a hot tub, with my soulmate." Coming from a middle-aged guy who lived in a van and sold cheap tupperware! Uncle Rico was stuck in the past. He was discontent with his current life. Nostalgia can tend to do this. It can paralyze us if we perceive things from the past to be better than they are now, even if they were actually worse than they currently are. Maybe your life was "better" back then, but nostalgia tends to skew reality and paint the past to be better than it actually was, so your perception probably isn't accurate. When I'm overcome with those feelings, I just remind myself of the many hard days that were present in the "good 'ole days." I pray, but I also give myself a bit of a reality check. Nostalgia is an overcoming feeling, which brings to mind 2 Peter 2:19-22:

"19 For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. 20 For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 21 For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. 22 What the true proverb says has happened to them: 'The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.'"

Though you can also be overcome by the Holy Spirit, which enslaves you to righteousness! With that, let's think about the profitable effects of nostalgia.

When Can Nostalgia be Good?

I think besides looking ahead to God's future promises, looking back on what he has already done can stir us up with joy in our salvation and thanksgiving for God's goodness. Israel was to remember and tell their children about how God delivered them from Egypt (Exodus 13:3-10). They would hold a feast to remember this through the generations. I know for me, if I hear a worship song from my early days as a new Christian, I feel nostalgic and it stirs me up. Nostalgia isn't the Holy Spirit (though it can be used by Him), but if it stirs me up in my faith and helps me to see how God has kept me and been good to me, it's a good thing! I think the longer a person has been a Christian, there is a greater number of good memories particularly of God's favor on our lives to be nostalgic over. Every second of every day, there is an increasing amount of memories of God's blessing and favor in my life piling up in a storehouse. Hearing an old worship song I haven't heard since my first couple years as a Christian makes me think, "Wow, I'm still going. I'm still in the race. God you're good for keeping me and preserving me. You're faithful." I have seen many people come and go over the years, so I am always blown away that I'm still at it. And I have no idea why. Somehow, day in and day out I just keep going. He perseveres me over and over. He has new mercies for me everyday.

"Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth." – Hosea 6:3

Are you an optimist, a pessimist, or a hopeful realist?

May 27, 2017

Where am I going with this?

I'm pretty sure I didn't think of the term first, but I want to spend this post talking about why I consider myself neither an optimist or pessimist, but rather a 'hopeful realist.' When pessimists defend their position, they will say they're not pessimists, but realists. That basically implies that the default of all life is that it generally sucks and if it can go wrong, it will. It therefore also implies that optimism requires one to either brush off, downplay, or ignore reality. In my opinion, both positions are "half right," which is why I don't consider myself to be either one. I will say however, if you're going to err on one side and choose between optimism and pessimism, optimism is the better choice. Let's think about each one:

Why are some pessimists?

There are probably a million different answers to this question. I think one reason pessimism is half-true is because the world really is broken (Gen. 3, Romans 8,...). Things go wrong constantly. Stuff rots and rusts. Storms destroy homes. Justin Beiber, the Kardashians, mosquitoes, yellow jackets, and male rompers exist...Not to mention the DMV. People betray each other, cheat each other, steal, slander, murder. People are selfish; they can be lazy co-workers, unreliable, etc. If you're a victim of any one of those in some way (which we all are on at least some level), you may have a proclivity to be pessimistic. Does it ever feel like you can't quite "get ahead" in life? Maybe you build up your emergency savings and get it where you want it, then something happens and you have to empty it and start over. Just when you start to feel like you have some traction...the wheels come off. This is not pessimism talking, this is reality talking. Nothing profound here. This is everyday life. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that. I bet all 3 of you reading said 'amen' when you read that! Wait a minute...I think that was just a little pessimism spilling out there^^^.

I have so many things to be negative about. I've had people betray me, steal from me, slander me, lie to me. I've had horrible bosses, broken down vehicles, kids and family with health issues, etc. Since moving to Florida, we have had a rough time with selling our house in Murphysboro. We had a renter for about 6 weeks that bailed out, a couple that put in an offer, then backed out of the contract; only to be back at square one 10 months after putting the house on the market. Trust me, I could sit here all day and the next day, and the next day listing all the things that have been awful in life. And by the end of it, I'd probably be super-angry and a big fat jerk ready to run around the neighborhood just throwing rocks through everyone's windows and burning ants with a magnifying glass. Have you been around people that literally pile that stuff up and accumulate it in their minds and use it as a foundation for being a 'realist'? It's almost like it turns into a resume. Like, look...here's why I'm such a negative Nancy...from 1982-84 I blah blah blah...and then from 1984-85 I went through my divorce and then from 1985-1995 I worked at a job where I was unappreciated and...so on. It shapes the lens through which they view everything. "I think such and such have ulterior motives." "Oh things are going so great, what's going to happen now?" Pessimists tend to look down on people that are optimists because they're just 'neieve' or 'haven't lived long enough yet,' or 'they're just really lucky.' Pessimists may even find enjoyment in the misfortune of others? I think if we're being honest, we all experience these thoughts and feelings on some level. I am often on a spectrum between optimism, pessimism, and hopeful realism. I experience a mixture of all 3 and it changes by the hour. Ok, enough laboring on pessimism...what about optimism?

Why are some optimists?

Optimists are the glass is half-full types. They are armed with lots and lots of Gandhi quotes, inspirational memes, various articles where someone rescued a kitten from a tree that are titled, "there are still good people in the world," God never gives you more than you can handle; when life hands you lemons, make lemonade—you get the point. They're no doubt encouraging people to be around (unless you're a pessimist, then they're annoying). There truly are good things in this world still. However, that isn't enough. Even good acts, when they're done apart from the Jesus of the Bible, aren't inherently good

acts. Thanks be to God for His common grace that prevents evil and pain and suffering and injustice from completely taking over! The 'good' things in the world simply aren't enough to swallow up all the hard things. It's good to try to be positive and have a good outlook on life, despite the current condition of the universe, but apart from Jesus and His work on the cross, it falls short.

The goal in life is not to try to accumulate enough 'good' things to outweigh the 'bad' things in life. For example, as long as more good things happen this week than bad, it was a good week. Or as long as I can find enough positive things and positive people and positive situations and meditate upon them and consider them and champion them, life is good. It breaks down and falls apart eventually. That positive mindset can only get one so far. Wait...Since I just spent less time talking about optimism, does that mean I am more of a pessimist? I don't know, what do you think? Would you tend to give me the benefit of the doubt? 😊

Why hopeful realism?

Ok...so finally...to *hopeful realism*. Hopeful realism is really something completely, entirely, different. It doesn't just simply take the good things from optimism and pessimism and fill in all the holes. It's so much more than that. If I could define it, I would describe it as a worldview that acknowledges and accepts the current brokenness and fallen state of the universe with a looking upon the present in-breaking of the Kingdom of God as well as the future glory and hope of full-redemption that is to be revealed, where everything will be made right and God's Presence will be fully manifest amongst His people. That definition needs a bit of polishing, but I can take the time to labor over that another day. That's at least the nuts and bolts of what I mean my hopeful realism. You can quickly see that apart from Jesus, one is either an optimist or a pessimist and neither is right. Ok, so how does this practically play out? What does this actually look like in action? Here's an example of a flow of thought in the mind of a hopeful realist:

I have prayed that God would heal my sickness and I believe and hope that he will, but he might not. I don't know if he will heal me.

– OR –

I've been hoping that my job situation will change, but it might not.

– OR –

I've been hoping that their marriage will make it, but it might not.

Sometimes we can be too quick (myself included) to tell people that everything will be alright or that it will work out. What if you tell somebody that it will work out and it doesn't? That could really mess someone up. You can see the obvious difference between hopeful realism and the other two. I think hopeful realism is Biblical too. We see examples of it with David:

21 Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food."

22 He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?'

23 But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." – 2 Samuel 12:21-23

David hopes and prays and believes, and his baby still dies.

– AND Jesus –

41 And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed,

42 saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." – Luke 22:41-42

And we know the obvious, ultimate outcome...Jesus was crucified. There are a number of examples of hopeful realism in the Bible, but those are the first two that come to mind for me. Search the scriptures for yourself and test it to see if it's true. I have many examples from my own life where the desired outcome has or has not taken place. However, I will

say many of the things I've prayed for, God has given me and even when he hasn't and doesn't give me what I want, even that stuff works for my eternal good (Romans 8:28).

I don't want to cut this too short here, but I believe the difference between hopeful realism and the other 2 is stark. Hopeful realism is in a completely different category of its own and is a worldview only made possible in the mind of a fallen human being by the work of the Holy Spirit. One aspect of being a Christian is also being a hopeful realist. I imagine I will write more on this subject in the future as it's sort of even something new to me that I have been considering and thinking upon lately. Hopefully I can flesh-it-out more clearly and more definitively down the road! Hope it's helpful for you. Happy Friday!

Keep the Lamp Burning

July 15, 2017

35 “Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, 36 and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.” – Luke 12:35-36

For me, and I think many others, the hard part about following Jesus for a lifetime is not doing the religious things (attending Sunday service, small group, serving, praying, going to conferences and retreats, showing hospitality, etc.). Nope. For me, the hardest thing is having a desire for Jesus day-in and day-out. If your heart isn't in those things, they all certainly can feel like work and be exhausting, but being weary in those things is not the issue. I think at the bottom of growing weary in well doing is a lack of affection for Jesus. The Puritans hit on this; modern-day Christians such as Piper hit on this; and it's so true in my own life.

It is A LOT of work to keep the fire kindled. You can do all of those religious things with literally no desire for God. Not true desire at least. Obviously, you don't stop doing those things just because your heart isn't always in them (otherwise I'd be quitting a lot), but it's important to not let yourself go for too long. This is on my mind a little more than usual for a couple reasons. One, the topic in group for the month is Seeking Jesus through Busyness and two, just because I'm feeling spiritually dull. Lately, food tastes better. Money tastes better. Possessions taste better. Vegging-out on technology tastes better. I'm a little more cynical and sarcastic in my thinking. I'm too tired to push through that wall and seek God's Presence. I know it. I see it. I understand what is going on with my heart. That's not enough.

Is it time to panick? I don't think so. If it was all dependent on me, I would have been a goner a long time ago. I can't forfeit my Salvation. But I could go through my days kind of spiritually dull. Lethargic. Minimally effective. But I have hope. I know I will again worship God with passion and again be consumed with zeal. Just as David knew he would

in the Psalms. It really is a race. The piece that requires the most exertion is keeping the lamp burning. Isn't this also true in marriage; another intimate relationship? Part of why I do this blog is to stir up myself. I think it's in these times that the real testing comes. Not when you're on the mountain-top (or sometimes maybe even in the valley?). John Piper really says it well (I'll paraphrase) by asking the question, How do you know you will wake up tomorrow and still have faith? If you answer, "I'll just make myself believe. I'll get in my Bible and just "will it" to happen." That is a very shaky foundation to stand on. No, we won't will ourselves to have faith when we wake up in the morning. If we wake up in the morning with faith, it's because he put it there! That's encouraging, and so I don't panic. I just trust Him. He will keep me. And I will again be on the mountain-top and praising Him again. That doesn't mean I don't exert myself. I just know I can rest in Him.

POSTSCRIPT, 2026

I wrote this comparing the wait to marriage without knowing how directly that would apply. The lamp went out more than once in the years since, including in the relationship I used as the example. I'm not going to pretend I kept it burning the whole time, because I didn't. But it's lit again now, mostly because I still don't know how to stop tending it.

Bearing Fruit in Drought

August 25, 2017

I have had a long hiatus from blogging. It has been a busy summer. I think if you made a word cloud of my life, BUSY would certainly dominate the landscape. It's been (mostly) good busy though. We have moved twice and the kids have been in 3 schools in the last year. We finally bought a house, and so now we have 2 mortgages. I'm thinking about considering myself to be a real estate investor, not by choice. Ironically, buying a house in Gainesville is cheaper than renting a mediocre apartment. Go figure. The church I attend is now a 1 year old and we moved to a new meeting space back in May. We've doubled in number and have some groups multiplying this fall, so that is refreshing! The new home is great. We love it. We live about a mile from Lucky's Market, which is probably the awesomest grocery store I have ever been to, and are also within 1 mile of the kids' school. I must say, coming through all of this, I am a bit crispy though. Lot's of headaches along the way and my Father's health has taken a tumultuous turn in the last few weeks. But I don't think my crunchy attitude and grumpiness are circumstantial.

I've just simply been spiritually dull, on-and-off for the last year. There are various reasons for this, some of which are out of my control. It's kind of been a spiritual drought. I'm not concerned that I will be in this "bologna and cheese on white bread with a side of lukewarm tap water-state" forever. Some things are in my control. But at this point, if getting some water on these crops rested on my willpower, I'm a goner. Step one is realizing you're in a spiritual slumber, so I've at least got that going for me. So I tell myself what we should tell ourselves, "seek Jesus." "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." Unfortunately, preaching to myself and saying truth doesn't always work. At least not right away. It's good to fight through these things and I actually think it's God's grace that we go through these seasons. Remember, "He works all things together for the good of those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8). It's that going beyond spiritual milk and moving on to solid food. It's the getting beyond just the elementary doctrines and moving on to the bigger things. Saying these spiritual things make my situation sound all

romantic, but my situation has felt like anything but that. Sometimes I walk around feeling spiritually like one of those dry, light blue packing peanuts that have been popping up all over the new house and blowing around as we slowly unpack. I'm a dry, little, light blue packing peanut at the moment. I know it won't last forever. "How long, O Lord? Will you hide your face from me forever?" Comforting to know that what I am experiencing, is normal (at least for David it was normal). I think our gut-reaction (or at least MY gut reaction) is to beat myself up for "not delighting" in God. Is that Biblical to beat ourselves up for NOT delighting in God? No. Yes, we should delight in God and it is actually sin to not delight in God, but we must remember that the sin of not delighting in God has already been dealt with, for the Christian. That can feel like a huge weight lifted off for someone that can feel beat down for not delighting in God. I trust Him. I know He will keep me. I know I will delight in Him again, and on that day when I'm finally delivered from my weak flesh, I will delight in Him forever. There are new truths and facets, and wonders about God to be known everyday and to discover for eternity. He really is the most enjoyable thing. See, faith is already rising up in me as I write. I hope faith continues to rise up in you, the reader!

I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD! – Psalm 27:13-14

POSTSCRIPT, 2026

The drought I meant here was a busy summer and a low mood. I didn't know yet what an actual drought would look like: my dad's death the next year, a brain tumor, a marriage that came apart slowly and then all at once, a divorce I didn't want. Romans 8:28 got harder to say out loud, not easier. I'm still here writing this, which is the only proof I've got that the verse at the bottom of this post is still true.

Identifying Truth: The Importance of Memorizing Scripture

September 6, 2017

It's not a big secret, but there are a lot of quotes and statements that we ourselves have used/made or read, possibly even from a young age that are not necessarily true. I remember a particular poem from as far back as elementary school called, "Invictus" written by William Ernest Henley in the mid-to-late 1800s. It was something we had to memorize as a class. The last stanza has always stuck with me:

*"It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul."*

A good question to ask, "Is that really true?" I mean, it sounds great and very self-empowering, but can you see the problem with it? It's easy to quickly glaze over statements without really understanding their meaning. I think of it like hearing a very popular song on the radio that is very catchy. I can hear it for months and not think twice about it, but then I actually pay attention to the lyrics and what's being said and they're actually talking about something (usually) pretty explicit. There is so much information and ways of thinking being presented to us 100s of times per day. I like to think I'm immune to it, but it definitely influences my thinking, sometimes at the subconscious level. How about a few more:

"YOLO"

"What goes around, comes around."

"Why do bad things happen to good people?"

"Be the best version of yourself that you can be."

“Follow your heart.”

“Time heals all wounds.”

And one more, it’s one I just read the other day actually:

“There is hope in men, not in society, not in systems, not in organized religious systems, but in You and me.” – Jiddu Krishnamurti

All of those statements are either false or partially true—depending on the context in which they’re used (except for the last quote, it’s absolutely false regardless of the context). The majority of the time, the context in which they’re used in our culture makes them all wrong. Discerning truth from untruth isn’t always easy—especially when it comes from credible sources or is a popular belief. Even the most credible people mispeak or are wrong sometimes; what’s always popular isn’t always right, and I know, this may come as a big shocker; what we believe, think, and say, is sometimes wrong. We must always be testing. Not just the incoming information, but even our own thoughts and beliefs. It’s a lot of work! And impossible to do apart from the Holy Spirit and the Bible.

What about popularized personas? We’re an entertainment-driven culture. Netflix, Hulu, etc. One favorite of mine is Parks and Recreation. My favorite character on that show? Ron Swanson. Ron is a Libertarian, Lagavulin-drinking, meat-eating, mustached-manly-man. He’s known to order dozens of eggs and bacon when he goes out to eat and he does woodworking at 2am. It’s kind of funny, but it’s easy as a man to adopt some of Ron’s ways of thinking, which is skewed from Biblical-masculinity. We may adopt some of these characteristics subconsciously. Something I have learned through study and good preachers, is the importance of memorizing large chunks of scripture. The point in doing that is not to be super-religious or to woo and aww people with our knowledge of scripture. The goal is to get Truth “in us” so that it creates a filter within our hearts and minds; informing our conscience. It helps us to hear a statement or teaching and be able to quickly decipher if what is being said or taught is true, partially true, or false. Sometimes we don’t have the luxury to sit down and analyze something. Many of our decisions and

actions in life are made in a few seconds or less. I must confess that I go through seasons of memorizing scripture, but I am not usually very diligent about it, especially in the last year. It takes a lot of effort and it isn't glamorous, but the impacts on my spiritual life are profound. I have used the little bit of scripture I have memorized as weapons against the world, my flesh, and the evil one. I may not always remember the exact verse or book of the Bible the passage is from, but I know the important part—the passage itself.

I was blown-away a few years ago when I watched a teaching by John Piper, where he recited the entire chapter of Romans 8 (now there's a chapter of the Bible worth memorizing!) completely from memory. His goal wasn't to look impressive, but to show that he was putting in the effort and was trying to encourage his church to do the same. He was essentially practicing what he was about to preach. That is a guy I can follow! There's a cool old proverb (not from the Bible) that I heard one time: "When is the best time to plant an oak tree? 25 years ago. When's the second best time to plant an oak tree? Today." Therefore, it isn't too late for new beginnings. Afterall, that is the Christian life. I have made a list of at least 5 good reasons to start memorizing scripture today:

1. Always Ready to Give An Answer

"15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15)

It helps to know at least the basics. We don't just tell our stories, but we actually preach truth, and it is from hearing that people start to believe.

2. Better Prayer Life

There have been many times where the Holy Spirit has spontaneously brought scripture to mind, both during prayer alone in a closet, and during prayer for/with a group of people. These scriptures were already something that were "in me," except maybe in a rare case. Every time this happens in my own prayer life or in praying for others, it's very encouraging and faith-building. It also helps guide you into Truthful prayers and knowing what and how to pray. Just don't become the "prayer police" and correct every little thing if

praying in a group. We all mispeak, especially if we're nervous when praying amongst other believers. If it's a big deal to you, just pull them aside afterwards and have a chat with the person. There has to be room for messy-ness, especially with young believers.

3. So you can "Preach" to Yourself.

There have been many situations where I have used scripture as weapons against my flesh, the world, and the enemy. I'm able to remind myself and guide my thoughts and emotions down a pathway of Truth—without despairing or feeling like the sky is falling. A few favorites of mine:

"14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:14)

"1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1)

"2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4)

Entirety of Psalm 23

"20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20)

The first one, Romans 13:14, has helped me many times from giving in to temptation involving mind-altering substances and/or sexual sin.

4. To Live

"4 But he answered, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

God's Word is a living and active Word, and it is life-giving. Over and over in the Old Testament, it went well for the kings that observed and walked in God's commandments

and statutes. How else do we know his statutes and commandments other than by reading and knowing scripture?

5. It's a Great Way to Spend Your Time

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8)

Memorizing scripture requires one to think about and meditate on a passage. It fills our minds and hearts with true, pure, lovely, commendable words and thoughts. What a wonderful way to spend our time. Afterall, the days are evil (Ephesians 5:15-16).

There are way more than 5 reasons to memorize scripture. That's just what I could come up with off-the-cuff, in no particular order, with minimal effort. There are probably even better reasons than these. Regardless, be encouraged. Don't feel beat down about "how you should read your Bible more." You probably should (and so should I), but let's "want" to read our Bibles more and not just read them for the sake of it or because we probably should. Jesus loves it when we cheerfully spend time with him. I don't always feel "cheerful" when I read my Bible, but I just pray for that to lift when it happens and press on. If you're in a season of that, keep going and pressing and it will break. And when it does, I promise, it will have been worth it!

On Criticism

October 21, 2017

Criticism: “The expression of disapproval of someone or something based on perceived faults or mistakes.” -Google Definition; “The act of criticizing usually unfavorably.” -Merriam-Webster Definition

Criticism has many different contexts and is helpful in some contexts (criticizing literary or artistic works, Biblical criticism, etc). The criticism I am concerned with is under the umbrella of the two definitions given above. And of those two definitions, the words I want to focus on most are the words “perceived” and “unfavorably.”

Criticism is literally everywhere, especially these days with a multitude of platforms such as Social Media, Google and Yelp Reviews, Trip Advisor, Rotten Tomatoes; probably hundreds more! Most people will not go to a restaurant, stay in a hotel, or do business with a company that doesn't have probably at least 3 out of 5 stars. There are word-of-mouth message boards, pages, and blogs everywhere. In my town of Gainesville, Florida, there is a noteworthy word-of-mouth message board on Facebook. There are aspects of it that are helpful, but I often see a lot of bashing going on. Gainesville Word-of-Mouth isn't the only place where this is a problem, it seems like it's nearly everywhere nowadays. I have noticed it more and more, which is why I have been thinking about it a lot lately.

Constructive criticism is very helpful. If you are a public speaker and someone sits in to take notes and give you feedback to make you a better public speaker, that's constructive criticism! “Hey, I noticed you say ‘um’ a lot whenever you speak. Try to pay attention to times when you do that and try to eliminate it.” That's constructive criticism. Here's an example of “Destructive” criticism:

“XYZ ice cream sucks because it comes in rolled-form and I like mine scooped. Why would anybody want to eat that crap?”

We have all seen examples of destructive criticism. I see it constantly and more often than the former. This type of criticism is essentially slander re-packaged and is very harmful. Do you feel comfortable in a critical environment? I feel like we live in a time where we must walk on egg shells. One of the problems is perception. I know this is a big shocker, but our perception isn't 100% accurate in any situation (due to our fallen nature, past life experiences, sin, etc.). Sometimes our perception can be completely off. Sometimes our perception isn't off, we just get angry and bash people, places, organizations, etc. because we're mad at them and want to make sure other people look at them unfavorably.

I think underneath this type of criticism is pride. Pride completely skews our perception. Unfortunately, we tend to gravitate or align ourselves with people that share a similar perception so that these perceptions may be reinforced and "justified." I don't expect non-Christians to disengage from this type of behavior. I don't expect the world to refrain from criticism. It can't and it won't apart from divine intervention. Here are few things I do to try to combat criticism in my own heart:

1. **Give the benefit of the doubt.** Give a person, a business, an organization, or whatever the benefit of the doubt. Try not to jump to conclusions too quickly and take everything at face-value. Remember, there are two sides to every story.
2. **Second chances.** Obviously, there are some exceptions, but try to give someone or something a second chance. What if you caught a really good restaurant you visited for the first time on a "bad day." I know for a fact, about once every five visits, even to my favorite restaurants, can be sub-par. People are not perfect (and neither are you), so don't expect perfection.
3. **Pause.** Be slow to speak. Look at your own perception of a person, place, or situation and test it to see if it's even accurate. Talk to someone else wise and trustworthy (without slandering) to help you see if it's accurate.
4. **Awareness of your own sins, weaknesses, and shortcomings.** This is at the heart of humility. It is right to know where we fall short and to dwell on how graciously God has dealt with us. This will protect us from pride and foster a right

humility. *“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25)*

5. **Pray.** This is a big one. Pray that you would have a soft heart and that you would see things rightly and accurately—especially when emotions are involved.
6. **Read the Bible.** This will lead you into truth and will give you guidance and wisdom on how to handle most situations.

I know there are many more practical things one can do to combat a critical heart. This is just a few. I will add, there is a difference between “trolling” and/or “bashing” and giving warning. Giving others caution and/or warning with the intentions of protecting someone or preventing someone from experiencing an unfavorable situation is a good thing. That is different. If you are being constructively critical for the good/benefit of others or a situation, that is different. But whatever you do, be slow to make assumptions or judgements. I think we can all agree we throw our words around way too carelessly (James 3:1-12). We will all give an account for every careless word we have ever spoken (Matthew 12:36-37). We cannot expect the world to use such caution with its words and actions, but these things ought not be so for Christians.

A Great Sinner Pardoned Makes a Great Singer

November 4, 2017

"A great sinner pardoned makes a great singer." -C.H. Spurgeon

I wish I could take credit for the title of my post, but they're the words of C.H. Spurgeon, from his commentary on Psalm 51. I have made it clear that this blog and essentially, my life, orbits around Jeremiah 17. If I had to choose another chapter of the Bible that represents a banner over my life and faith, it would most certainly be Psalm 51.

I remember going through a painful season of confession and repentance in the spring of 2013. It was the most tumultuous, uncertain, sorrowful, risky, and yet joy-filled time of my life. I mean that in the least-melodramatic-way possible. I remember reading and praying Psalm 51 over and over during those months. I remember tears hitting the pages and rocking back in forth in my chair as I was in so much angst. A good angst. A Godly angst. An angst of real repentance. By God's Grace and the Holy Spirit, I saw the severity and seriousness of my unrepented, unconfessed sin; sin that I promised myself I would take with me to the grave. Psalm 51 brought me comfort and it gave me a starting place during that time. Each day the significance of Psalm 51 increases in my life as I truly am a man who has been forgiven much. C.H. Spurgeon's words come from Psalm 51 and I believe also from Luke 7:47-48:

"Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loves much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."

Essentially, those who have been forgiven much, love much. I can tell you the amount of love and grace I now have for people since that season of repentance versus before that season is exponentially greater. My worship and thankfulness towards Jesus is head-and-shoulders beyond what it used to be. What the enemy meant for evil, God meant for good. Psalm 51 so clearly shows David's growing upward and downward, simultaneously. He has the mixture of confidence in dealing with God and yet also great sorrow, angst, and

healthy fear of God. Unless a person has experienced true repentance of sin (regardless of the severity of the offense), they cannot understand this mixture of conflicting thoughts, feelings, and emotions seen in David in Psalm 51.

What made that season of my life so significant and so effective is that people loved me enough to let me swim around in it without picking me up too quickly. We are a culture that wants to make our lives as comfortable and pain-free as possible. We often like to brush off and downplay serious stuff going on in our lives. I must say, the Christian life is by definition not lived in that kind of way and if one who is a professing Christian makes a habit of living life that way, they will not only miss out on the many things God has for them in life, but they may prove themselves to not be a believer at all.

“No one born of God Makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.” (1 John 3:9).

Whether one is a Christian or not, in repentance, the response is still the same. The Christian life is a life of repentance. Although I went through a season where God was doing massive, life-changing things, I still live a life of repentance and confession today. Regardless of wherever you are on the spectrum (not a Christian, a new Christian, or a Christian who’s been following Jesus for years), I have a few suggestions/encouragements when it comes to confession and repentance:

1. There is nothing you have done that is a secret to God. Everything is before His eyes. If by not saying something out loud or admitting something to yourself makes something feel less real, not real, or less true, it has already happened, it is very real, and it will be addressed either willingly or unwillingly in this life or the next.
2. There is nothing you have done that cannot be forgiven by God.
3. Although there are still sometimes consequences to our sin in this life, if you are saved you are not destined for wrath (1 Thess. 5:9).

4. It is possible that by confessing sin, the worst case scenario can happen depending on the severity of the sin (loss of a friendship or marriage, loss of a job, jail time, church discipline, a tarnished reputation, public shame or embarrassment, etc), but Jesus is worth it. Do you believe that? Answer it honestly. Be honest with yourself and with God. If it isn't true about you, pray that you would value relationship with Him more than anything. Afterall, true repentance is a supernatural gift given by God.

5. God has a way of uncovering or disclosing sin one way or another. Why not boast in your own weaknesses and shortcomings before both God and man, so that the power of God may rest upon you (2 Corinth. 12:9).

6. Maybe what you fear will happen, won't actually happen. Is it so crazy to think that maybe the enemy has been lying to you in saying that xyz will happen if you confess what you have done, because he knows verses like James 5:16 which say, "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed"?

7. Confessing sin brings about reconciliation to God. If it is sin against a person, confessing to that person may not necessarily bring reconciliation with them, but at least you have a chance to be reconciled. Like a good friend and spiritual father once told me, when it comes to confessing hidden sin to the person you have sinned against, not confessing gives you a 0% chance for reconciliation, but confession will give you at least a 1% chance. A great example is a struggling marriage that is laden with hidden sin (substance abuse, gambling, pornography, adultery, etc.)

8. Have you ever heard "the truth will set you free?" It most certainly will. We are not made to carry around the burden and weight of hidden sin. As a Christian, if it doesn't make ship-wreck of your faith, it will leave you in a "meh" existence and render you ineffective. But as I already alluded to, persistent, life-long resistance to confessing sin is evidence that you are not a believer. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit is very patient in dealing with us.

9. My resistance to my conscience and the Holy Spirit in hiding my sin led to other sins. Lies upon lies and substance abuse to deal with the suppression and guilt of my sin in my case. This will not get better, but only get worse and will eventually lead to death.

10. We have to face the music. So many men walk around behaving like boys when they hide their sin. What does my son do when he does something he knows he's not supposed to? He hides his sin. What did Adam do when he sinned? He hid from God. Part of the repentance and subsequent confession process does require exercising our own wills in dealing with our junk. It's not all on God to make us do everything. And let me tell you, it's not for the faint of heart. But do you love Him? Do you really want to follow Him? Count the cost.

I could probably come up with at least 10 more points to add to the list, but I think you get the gist of it. No one can promise you that repentance and subsequent confession of sin won't be painful, risky, scary, or come with real consequences, but I can tell you that regardless of the outcome, Jesus is most certainly worth it. My prayer is that you would see and savor Jesus as the best thing in the universe, handing over everything to him with no part of you "off limits." In living a life of repentance, you will feel forgiven much and therefore love much out of the overflow of that. Just trust Him.

An uncomfortable place

December 5, 2017

Recently, my thoughts have been gravitating towards the sobering reality of Romans 8:22:

“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.”

The context is the subjection of all creation to futility—that there is suffering in this present time. The word “groaning” is such an accurate description of what we experience in this life. However, I don’t think there is a word in the English language that fully captures what we experience in terms of “groaning.” Even when life is “good,” there is still this dull ache that lingers like a migraine.

Our clothes iron finally died recently. It was a wedding gift to us from my great grandmother (who is also dead). We just celebrated our 11th anniversary, so we had a good run with that iron! Theresa bought a new one last week. It works great and so much more efficiently than the other iron, which was evidently at the end of its rope the last few months. I don’t like the new iron, yet. I want the old iron. I would take the old iron back, even if it meant it didn’t work as good as our new one. But I don’t think it’s really the old iron I miss. I think it goes deeper than that. The iron reminded me of my great grandmother, who is gone. She was sweet. I have tons of pleasant memories spent with her. In fact, I have had lots of people in my life that have given me fond memories. They have either died or I no longer live close to them. It’s sad. Life is sad sometimes. Even when there is no apparent reason. Sometimes my son is downcast and I will ask him, “what’s wrong?” He’ll say, “I’m sad.” When I ask why, he’ll say, “I don’t know.” Sometimes I think he really doesn’t know why. He just is. Even when things are “good.” As adults, we are not immune to this experience. If anything, we probably experience it more, or at least I do. Why? We’re groaning. One of my friends, James, who is now separated from me by about 1,500 miles used to say we try to “refuse” to groan. I really love how he put that. We try to “refuse” to groan by filling ourselves with something (i.e., food, sex, possessions,

travel, entertainment, sleep, making ourselves look attractive, exercise, drugs or alcohol, pornography, relationships) or literally anything and everything that releases dopamine in our brains. Our very souls, not just our bodies, are downcast at times.

What do you fill yourself with? For me, my go-to is food. It's a little more socially-acceptable and is less damaging to my faith, marriage, and life than pornography or mind-altering substances, but it still falls short. There are probably many things you fill yourself with that are either on or off that list, but I bet there are 1 or 2 that are your mainstays. Sure, if we're a Christian, there are times when we go to Jesus for comfort and fulfillment when we are groaning, but there are many times that we don't. Or at least that's the case for me if I'm honest with myself. In this life, I don't think we ever fully get over this, but that doesn't mean we've lost, as long as we don't throw-in-the-towel. We keep fighting and we fight by being filled with the Holy Spirit, not just merely on sheer will-power.

It should be said that I also believe God appoints created things as something to bring us comfort in this life. He appointed a plant to spring up over Jonah to relieve him of his discomfort. God gave Adam a wife because he said that it was not good for man to be alone. It's part of his amazing Grace. The real problem occurs when we prefer the filling of ourselves with these created things over filling ourselves with God. The plant withered and we all know what happened with Adam and Eve. Eventually created things fail to deliver (because they're not made to). By whatever means God chooses to relieve us from our discomfort, He's the source. Here's to hoping I keep fighting again this week!

The Holidays

December 10, 2017

The Holidays are always an interesting time of year for me. Christmas is great—by far my favorite holiday. Besides celebrating Jesus' birth, there is a lot of nostalgia surrounding the Christmas season. This time of year doesn't come without a few challenges though:

1. Lack of Routine. I don't necessarily "like" routine, but I have found that it is good for me and thus, necessary. November and December disrupt my routines, which tends to throw me off a bit. I'm thinking more in terms of "spiritual" routines. I am usually out of town a lot this time of year and miss Sunday services, as well as small group. This tends to isolate me a bit and keep me away from my most edifying relationships. This usually opens up the door for temptation for me in various areas. It's usually a bit of a fight to get through the holidays unscathed.

2. Lack of Motivation. I don't know if it's because of all the delicious food or the short days and suspect weather, but it's hard to be productive this time of year. The year is winding down and everyone is starting to think about the next one.

3. The Holidays can be Exhausting and Expensive. The dynamics have changed a bit now that I live across the country from family, but historically, the holidays are always a busy time. Theresa and I used to go to like 3-5 different family dinners between Christmas and New Years. Even though she did most of the buying and wrapping, what I did help out with was exhausting. And buying all those gifts gets a bit expensive too! It's easy to lose sight of "why" we do it all in the first place, aside from tradition.

4. Reflecting on the Last Year(s). This can be good or bad, depending on how the year went. Sometimes I find myself not just thinking about the last year, but years. Depending on how far I go back, some of those years weren't very good! This can be nostalgic, but also bring up bad memories. Either way, it's usually a mixture of good and bad for me.

I guess there's a few things I have learned over the years in terms of combatting the difficult parts of the holiday season. Beginning with #1, Lack of Routine. I just simply acknowledge this ahead of time and try to bring my guard up in advance. Being isolated is the most challenging aspect of the lack of routine this time of year. Already, I have missed the last 2 Sunday services at my church and I can feel the "leaky-ness" that has occurred. It's just a natural thing. I just see it for what it is and try not to fret, knowing that it's just temporary. I know once I get back into community, my spiritual dullness will wear off. In the meantime, I try to self-feed spiritually as much as possible.

In regards to #2, the Lack of Motivation, I try to remember to finish out the year strong. It doesn't make sense to almost run an entire marathon and walk the last mile. It's important how you finish things. Why stop doing the things you've been doing all year?

For #3, this one can be the most difficult. It doesn't apply to me as much anymore, but if it does for you, here are a few thoughts. You may have to make the choice to not go to 5 different places for Christmas dinner some years, especially if you live near a lot of family. You won't win any popularity contests doing that and you may get some kick-back from certain family members, but it will be worth it. You may also not want to spend thousands of dollars on gifts, thus straining your bank accounts to the point where you'll be recovering for the next few months and eating Ramen Noodles after January 1st. No, you're not a stingy person if you choose not to buy everyone a gift this Christmas. Be a cheerful giver, but don't put too much pressure on yourself. Choose one dinner to spend time with your closest friends and/or family and only get them gifts.

And lastly, #4 Reflecting on the Last Year. Try to focus on the better parts. Think about God's grace and faithfulness over the last year and what He's done in your life. For me, He did countless wonderful things. He's strengthened parts of my marriage, done things in my kids, provided for us financially and kept our health. He's been working in my parents and other family members, provided a house and for Theresa, a job. He's grown the church we are part of, etc., etc. I could go on-and-on. Try not to look too far inward at your pitfalls and shortcomings. Looking inward at our navels will never accomplish anything, but

bring about self-pity, doubt, and depression. I'm not talking about simple positive thinking, like Zig Ziglar kinda stuff, I'm talking about real thankfulness towards God for what He has done. Even if it had been a really terrible year for you, which is possible, there are at least a few noteworthy things to be thankful for.

Despite the difficulties that come with the holidays, try to enjoy them as well. Most Christians could stand to "feast" and enjoy or celebrate things a bit more. Wedding ceremonies in the Old Testament lasted as long as one week and there were other celebrations of those times that lasted for months or years. Heaven throws a party over every sinner who repents. Get some R&R and enjoy things a bit!

Wanting and Not Wanting

December 17, 2017

I've had these things on my mind lately, so I felt so inclined to bring them up. I apologize in advance if some of what I say is a bit heavy-handed. That is not my intention and I'm not trying to say anything shocking. Just trying to be real. If you're a Christian, you more than likely experience a constant inner-turmoil at the heart, mind, and soul-level. What I mean is this ability to want to do something and not want to do something at the same time—either good or bad. You may even feel a bit crazy at times, I know I do. How can you want to do something and not want to do something at the same time? Paul talks about his internal struggle with living by the Spirit and yet still giving into the desires of the flesh:

15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.

17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. – Romans 7:15-20

I feel this way a lot. It's pretty painful at times. Let me give an example. Sin is fun, which is why we do it. When I am tempted to sin, I'm tempted because I know for at least a moment, it will be fun and enjoyable. But I also know somehow, it will be both enjoyable and not enjoyable at the same time. I hate to be too blunt or insensitive with my words, but what if I decided today I wanted to go out and do a couple lines of cocaine. I can promise you, it would most certainly be fun. I would be lying if I said it wouldn't. But it would also be not-fun, and the consequences of doing it would far-exceed the temporary

enjoyment that it brought. These kinds of conflicting desires really create an inner “angst.” Although at times, very painful, this angst is a wonderful thing and something that should be cultivated. There really is a “suffering in the flesh” that is necessary in this life when it comes to following Jesus:

- 1 Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,
- 2 so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.
- 3 For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.
- 4 With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;
- 5 but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.
- 6 For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does. – 1 Peter 4:1-6

To cease from sin means to suffer in the flesh. It is so painful to not do the thing that you really want to do. If you struggle with pornography, not going to that computer screen, tablet, or phone will be painful. You will be denying yourself “temporary” comfort and pleasure. And I can assure you, 90% of the time, when you don’t give into that temptation, you’re not just going to feel an immediate “pat-on-the-back” and just feel really good that you didn’t bite the hook that time around. You’re probably going to feel uncomfortable for at least a little while because you didn’t satiate that hunger or thirst. Do you feel good if you haven’t eaten for 24 hours and somebody puts a nice juicy steak under your nose for you to smell and then you don’t get to eat it? Of course not. Whether a desire is right or wrong, not curbing that appetite will not feel pleasant. You want relief. Unfortunately, sin doesn’t relieve and just like when you eat a steak, you’re hungry again a few hours later. I can promise you however, that if you keep fighting your sin and putting that desire to death, the temptation will feel less-intense and probably start to come up less-frequently.

You will begin to experience more freedom in that given area and open the door for God to start doing work in other areas of your life.

You know what gets really frustrating? Knowing what's true, knowing what giving into sin produces (displeases God, guilt, shame, more sin, not feeling satisfied, etc.) and still doing it anyway. How can a person know all those things and still do something anyway? I think sometimes I think somehow the outcome will work out differently or that somehow this time will be different than the last time. Isn't the definition of insanity doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results? So there's the part of me that really wants to do something and thinks it will be great and somehow different this time and then there's the other me who doesn't want to do it and knows it won't go well for me. It's almost like there's two people within me (which there really is to an extent – look again at what Paul said). At my core, there's the man who wants to live by the Spirit and a life pleasing to God, but then around that core is all these conflicting desires of my former-self (the flesh).

So what do we do then? Well, I think there are both practical and spiritual things that can be done. I'll start with the practical and then move to the spiritual:

1. If you struggle with pornography, either put some sort of protective software on all your devices or take them all into the back yard and either smash them or set them on fire like a good friend of mine once did with his electronics. If you are looking at pornography on your computer at work, then find a different job. Whatever you need to do, be serious about it.
2. If going out and partying a bit too hard with your friends or coworkers is an issue, get some new friends. Again, be drastic (If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off – the words of Jesus). Be ruthless with your sin. Isn't your sin ruthless with you?
3. If you struggle with alcoholism or using drugs, get some type of counseling or go to AA or Narcotics Anonymous. Take a different route home if your normal one takes you by a

liquor store, bar, or certain neighborhood.

Alright, you can see where I'm going with the practical stuff. You can apply these drastic principles to practically anything. Once again, I didn't say any of this would be easy. I may be bringing it up in a cavalier manner, but know that I know it's easier said than done. And believe me, I've done these very kinds of things, so I'm not just saying things that I haven't done or am not willing to do myself. Okay, into the spiritual stuff now (though note, there's a little overlap to the spiritual/practical stuff)...

4. Don't fight sin on your own. Seek Jesus by praying to Him and asking him to kill these desires within you. You cannot truly experience real freedom in these areas in the ultimate-sense without the work of the Holy Spirit. Any behavior modification apart from Jesus is merely just that—behavior modification and not true freedom. It won't get at the heart (pun-intended) of what's really going on. You have to sever it at the root.

5. Try to find a healthy local church where you can be in community with other believers who can pray for you, encourage you, and speak into your life—holding you accountable.

6. Don't just put-off your desires, but seek to find their satiation in Jesus—the cistern that doesn't leak and the bread that never leaves you hungry.

7. Find scriptures in the Bible that speak to your specific situation and write them down so that you may draw from them in times of temptation and vulnerability. One I always keep in my back pocket is Romans 13:14...

“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

I will even say that verse aloud sometimes when I feel tempted to Sin. You have to have something to go to when those conflicting desires come up, otherwise your strength in fighting them will erode over time until you eventually just don't care anymore and give in. Will power alone won't get you there. Lastly, and most importantly, we aren't just fighting sin just for the sake of fighting sin. We have a new life and a new nature along

with a new inheritance and a citizenship in Heaven. But even more important than that, we fight it because we love Jesus and we want relationship with Him more than anything. He's good to His children. He has killed the fattened calf, put a nice robe on us, and a ring on our finger. We are His. Let us not forget who we are in Christ. We are no longer our former selves. Wherever you're at in life, keep pressing on to know the LORD. And we will reap eternity with Him, if we don't lose heart and give up!

Rid Your Life of Negative People: Good Mantra or Bad Mantra?

January 13, 2018

It's early-2018 and so some resolutions are still in full-force. Among all of the resolutions and newly-adopted mantras I see during each new year, one of the more troubling ones I see is the mantra of "ridding one's life of all negative people or people who don't inspire you or believe in you." From a pure, worldly stand-point, this mantra makes perfect sense. However, as Christians we are not of this world. I'm afraid that Christians who adopt this mantra risk doing more harm to their life and faith, than good if they do not proceed with caution or with at least a few caveats. Obviously, like many mantras, this one is an oversimplification. Life is always more complex than just a simple mantra.

I would have a few questions for a Christian that adopts this type of mantra. For example, what do they mean by "negative people?" Do they mean people that influence them to stumble into sin or that are in some way a hindrance to their faith? Do they mean people that just have a negative attitude or are painful to be around due to personality, or demeanor, or life circumstance? They may have a good case if they're referring to the former type of people, but not necessarily for the latter. There are seasons where we need to distance ourselves from friends or family that cause us harm or influence us into sinning ("You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?...A little leaven leavens the whole lump" Ephesians 5:7 and 5:9). But even then, it's pretty tough to make that into a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

I believe there are times (and many times at that) when the Holy Spirit leads us to "bear with" messy or difficult people. We do not exist just to please ourselves (Romans 15:1). Jesus hung around very messy and very difficult people. He died for a messy and difficult people. Romans 5:7-8 says, "For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Israel was also a stiff-necked people

(Exodus 33:5) and yet God chose over and over to be in their midst. It's easy to surround ourselves with "good" people that are easy and require little wherewithal on our part. But the Gospel changes everything. We are called to associate with the lowly and to love difficult people by sacrificing our time, energy, money, and sometimes our lives. Yes, there are times to "go" or flee, but there are also times to "stay" and fight.

I am certainly thankful I had a few people walk with me through my messy season of life. I can assure you, it was a very one-way relationship for a time, where they got very little out of it in terms of reciprocation from my end. If anything, being friends with me came at a cost to them spiritually, emotionally, and financially. Those who are strong have an obligation to bear with the weak:

"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me' (Romans 15:1-3).

This is what it looks like to really "love" people. Whether that be in marriage, friendship, or any of our relationships. Some of you would do well just to apply this to your marriages. What would your marriage look like or how would it change if you saturated it with the truth of Romans 15?

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive."

I am so thankful God never adopted the mantra "rid yourself of negative people or people who are difficult to be around." Can you see why such a mantra (that at first glance and on the surface sounds good) is actually borderline un-Biblical? I always cringe a bit or feel concern when I hear Christians adopt this way of thinking. Yes, there are times when we are supposed to distance, sever, or "rid" ourselves of certain people or certain situations,

but I think there are many times where we should remain in a situation and fight or sacrifice ourselves. Believe it or not, God does ask us to do things from time-to-time that come at some type of cost or that don't seem like the most logical or safe bet. Sometimes he asks us to do things that are very painful and very risky. Here's to taking more risks and bearing with more people in 2018!

The “Last”

February 26, 2018

No, this won't be my last blog post (unless I die tomorrow), in case the title threw you off. I'm talking about Christians. We're the “Last.” It's a theme that seems to be coming up for me today. So why are Christians last? There are at least 4 reasons...

Reason #1: We've given up everything

“Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you” (Mark 10:28

Reason #2: We live a pitiable life to the rest of the world.

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:12-19)

The world says,

“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” 1 Corinthians 15:32

The Christian essentially says,

“Let us not eat and drink, for tomorrow we live!”

Based on the context of the verses, “eating and drinking” doesn't refer to literal eating and drinking for sustenance, but rather refers to “go on sinning” or giving in to our fleshly desires as if there is no consequence.

Reason #3: We are the refuse of all things. Fools.

"For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we are in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (1 Corinthians 4:6-13)

It's true that not all of us are apostles, but these are common (some more common than others) experiences for all Christians.

Reason #4: Many of us were chosen "underdogs."

"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Corinthians 1:26).

Those verses speak for themselves. In summary, being last means some hardship, selflessness, suffering, persecution, giving up everything, and sometimes death. It is normal as Christians to experience these things and feel the cornucopia of emotions that go along with it, but take heart, Christian! What is on the other side of those verses? Work back from the top...

The other side of Reason #1: "We've given up everything."

(Look at the verses that follow Mark 10:28):

"Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time...and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first'" (Mark 10:29-31).

The other side of Reason #2: “We live a pitiable life to the rest of the world.”

“You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound”
(Psalm 4:7)

“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

The other side of Reason #3: “We are the refuse of all things. Fools.”

“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance of death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

The other side of Reason #4: “Many of us were chosen underdogs...”

(Look at the verses that follow 1 Corinthians 1:26)

“But God chose what is foolish to the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

So it’s true that we are last in this life, but we are first in the next. Again, it’s one of those paradoxical truths of Christianity. Jesus is worth being “last,” for. That’s the best thing we get for being last. He’s the ultimate possession. We become “first” because we get him. Jesus became the ultimate “Last,” so that we could become first. Those truths have to resonate with us at all times, and especially during our seasons of life where we really feel like we are dead last.

Let's Keep it Real

March 10, 2018

Most of my blog posts are motivated by my observations, experiences, and emotions. That can get kind of risky when you start talking about spiritual matters, especially if those observations, experiences, and emotions aren't grounded in Truth. They can be a bit subjective. Nonetheless, I do not claim that what I write here is perfect. A lot of content is my personal opinions and should absolutely be tested. My ultimate goal for each of my posts is to encourage the reader—in whatever place they're in (non-Christian, young Christian, mature Christian; a person in a season of affliction; a person in a season of joy and gladness, etc.) and to point them to Jesus. I like to try to keep things as "real" as possible, but without being shocking, dramatic, or dishonoring with my language. In a culture where the average attention-span is about 10 seconds and where our lives are displayed on superficial platforms that make us always look clean, perfect, and happy; I think transparency and truth about what's really going on in our lives beyond the surface-y stuff is critical.

Honestly, writing blog posts about real stuff is very painful. Every single time I write something and hit the "Publish" button, all types of insecurities bubble-up: "Does this make me sound like I'm trying to be a know-it-all?" "Do these posts make me look like I'm full of it?" "What if somebody disagrees with what I write?" "Does this make me look crazy to some people?" The list could go on. I always try to bring myself back to the "why?" Why do I write these posts? What's the motivating factor? At the bottom of everything—at the most fundamental level—broken down to the most basic fragments—I want people to know and love Jesus. Even at the expense of my own reputation or "what people think." Fear of man is a very powerful thing. And in my opinion, it's one of the biggest things that keeps us from obeying and submitting to Jesus.

I live in north Florida, which is basically similar in culture and attitude to the rest of "The South." Now you get into central and south Florida, and those are different animals there!

That's where you hear about people getting DUI's on horses and getting attacked by sweet, cuddly Otters who have gone rogue. Like the rest of the South, north Florida is very "churched." It's almost a cultural phenomenon, really. Almost everyone goes to church. One minute, some guy's talking about listening to Chris Tomlin and how great church was on Sunday, and within the same breath says, "Hey, did you check out the rack on that woman that just walked by?" Now, don't get me wrong, all Christians are hypocritical to varying degrees. That's not what I'm getting at here. There are plenty of legitimate Christians walking around who struggle with lust and love of money, and fill in the blank. The keyword is "struggling." Some people aren't struggling.

I have recently been reading Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan. Bunyan was a Puritan preacher and author from the 1600s, whose applications are still relevant today. The book is basically an allegory of the Christian life. In the story, one of the characters is someone named "Pliable." Pliable represents the person who hears the Word and has joy and embraces it at first, but falls off the track once difficulty arises. I think many people are in this spot. Particularly, the guy who loves the worship on Sunday, but comments on the woman's appearance that walks by. As soon as he has to start fighting sin and goes through hardship, he's out. There's a shallowness to his faith. In what I have observed, the vast majority of the type of Christianity that is purported in America today herds people into this category: a very shallow level of faith that still has a "lets have our cake and eat it too" mindset that finds it perfectly okay to give into carnal desires whilst professing faith in Jesus. It's essentially a self-centered Gospel where God is supposed to support you and your life goals and make you a lot of money and establish you in your career or business with no health problems. It's very sad and self-deceiving.

I think my Dad will let me pick on him a bit. A few years ago, he became a Christian. He's a legitimate Christian. The day after he was baptized, he wound up in the hospital and was diagnosed with a very rare liver disease called PSC, for short. For the 75% of the time since he's been a Christian, his health has steadily declined. He is no longer able to work. His health insurance and medical costs are through the roof, and he is much more limited on what he can do in terms of normal, daily activity. If that wasn't enough, a few weeks ago

he broke his leg while slipping on some ice. His femur bone broke in-half and he had to get surgery the next day to repair it. He now has a rod in his leg and will be on at least a 6-month recovery of rest and physical therapy before his leg is back to normal. The injury to the leg has put a lot of stress on his already failing liver and so now he is very close to needing a transplant or he doesn't make it. Once he gets his transplant, it's another 6 months to a year recovery for that major surgery. Can you see where I'm going with this?

The have your cake and eat it too Christianity doesn't focus on suffering, affliction, depression, sin, death, etc. Can I assure you that suffering, affliction, and depression is a means by which God has chosen as a mechanism of growing in maturity (sanctification), becoming more Christ-like in one's faith? Christ himself suffered—to the point of death. There is a real cost to following Jesus. Suffering and hardship is a necessary ingredient to the Christian life. Not my words:

“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not resisted to the point of shedding blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those have have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:3-11).

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4).

“For you , O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid a crushing burden on our backs; you let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.” (Psalm 66:10-12)

“Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.” (Isaiah 48:10-11)

“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that way may also be glorified with him.” (Romans 8:16-17)

There are many other places in the Bible that show suffering and affliction as a necessary part of the Christian life. To me, when I read the Bible, I see that God uses hardship as one type of means of maturing us in our faith, and make us more like Christ. And His goal behind it is our holiness and our good. Additionally, it's so that we do not give our affections to another:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

“For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.” (Isaiah 48:11)

And these two verses are not competing things, but are tied together. It is for our good that we only give glory to God and nothing else. God knows he's the most satisfying thing in the universe and that only in Him will we find complete satisfaction. It's an act of love from God. We must not empty the Gospel of suffering. Let's talk about real stuff. I don't know about you, but I think life can be pretty hard sometimes. Let's not pretend like it's not. I can tell you money has yet to solve my sin issue. Possessions have yet to solve my sin issue. My marriage has yet to solve my sin issue. My kids have yet to solve my sin issue. Sex has yet to solve my sin issue. A glass of wine has yet to solve my sin issue. The good weather has yet to solve my sin issue. Going on vacation has yet to solve my sin issue. My

smart phone has yet to solve my sin issue. My job has yet to solve my sin issue. I've tried all those things, trust me. They don't work.

Who are you aiming to be considered by?

May 8, 2018

One word to focus on today: **Consider.**

“Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.” – Psalm 13:3

“And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?”
– Job 1:8

“What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” –
Psalm 8:4

If you're anything like me, you like to be “considered.” It's human nature. And also the way that God built us. As I grow older (I turn 30 in a couple short months), I've realized that I've spent a great deal of my life trying to be considered. By “considered” I mean, “be payed attention to, affirmed, recognized, acknowledged, being made mindful of, etc.” During much of my life, there's been a consistent hunger for praise, acknowledgement, appreciation, an “atta-boy,” a pat-on-the-back. Plaques, framed pieces of paper, medals, awards, accomplishments, etc. We want to be noticed both when we're doing well, and when we're suffering. “Look at everything I've done! Look at how awesome I am” or “look at me—look at how bad I have it, consider my painful situation.”

The desire to be considered isn't wrong. The key is to shift the direction of the desire or aim for it to come from THE right person. This is one reason why the Bible puts so much emphasis on aiming to do good deeds (i.e. prayer, fasting, giving away your possessions, working hard at your job, caring for the spiritual needs of your family, etc.) in secret, not before man (though sometimes that's necessary):

5 “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. – Matthew 6:5-6

16 “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,

18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. – Matthew 6:16-18

22 Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,

24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. – Colossians 3:22-25

If you’ve been a Christian for any amount of time, you probably already know much of this, but I think it takes time (like most everything else) for God to knead it into us like dough. Some will struggle with this less than others, depending on their personality, upbringing, and just general life experiences. But let’s face it, we all want to be praised by someone. It’s ok to get praise from spouses, parents, bosses, leaders, etc., but their praise or lackthereof, should not make or break us and their consideration should not be our highest aim. God’s praise should be of highest esteem and regard and His praise and consideration should be the aim or motivation behind our goodworks. Many of the goodworks are done towards people, but even the positive effects of those good works on the people you pour into should not be at the apex of your motivation for doing it. People

are flimsy and basing one's happiness, contentment, or motivation in well-doing on the "being considered by" or response of others can be (and will be) at some point detrimental to you.

If you're like me, you are still going to experience (at the very least) microcosms of this disappointment or painfulness—even in the midst of aiming to be only considered by God—until you're called Home. And some of us will experience it in greater or lesser varying degrees than others. But I just say to that, take heart.

In the case of Job, I find it encouraging that God sees Job and even brags about him. Job is a righteous man. Wouldn't that be good to receive that type of recognition from God, to see your life as pleasing to Him? The Psalms are peppered with the speakers praying and longing for God to consider them. On that Day, we all want to hear "well done good and faithful servant" and to receive crowns that we can turn around and offer back as worship to God. That should be our aim. If it's our aim, we will not be crippled by a lack of it from man. Or even when something worse happens—displeasure from people. Most of us will have this kneaded into us through hardship, discipline, and trial. It may be a painful process, but a good one nonetheless.

A good gauge for if this is a big struggle: Do you feel disappointed when you don't receive affirmation or recognition, to the point where you feel crippled, depressed, or jaded? Do you have an "I love me wall" (an area with all your awards, trophies, ribbons, certificates) in your home or office that would just be difficult to part ways with if Jesus asked you to? Knowing myself, I refuse to put up an I Love Me Wall in my house or office. I have 2 college degrees that have been sitting in a nice big frame for the last 5 years, collecting dust next to a book case in our guest bedroom. Those two pieces of paper were expensive and a lot of work! Plus, do you know how many parking tickets I had to deal with throughout the years of working on those things???

It just helps me "aim" to seek affirmation from Jesus by practically not having an I Love Me Wall. Praise of man has been a fuel for most of the things I've done or sought to do in life, and so my goal is to get free of that. The goal is not to become a "rebel" and just say, "I

don't care what anyone thinks about me," but rather the aim is to most-care about what Jesus thinks. It's right to encourage, exhort, and affirm one another in the Church (especially in marriage and especially if it's your spouse's love language), but just don't let it make or break you. I want to have a confidence and a steadfastness in who Jesus says I am and what he thinks of me, so that regardless of what I do or don't receive from man, I'm not shaken.

And lastly, it's ultimately about God's glory. We want to experience approval from our Heavenly Father, but the ultimate goal is for the universe to see how great Jesus is and to consider Him. That He would become greater and we would become less. Oh, and if you're In Christ, God the Father already looks on you with great pleasure—despite your continued sinning and regardless of your good works.

Parenting Lesson #341

May 25, 2018

Parenting has many challenges. We are all thrust into it, basically without any training, and many people are just simply armed with poor examples from their own childhood. It's basically a trial-by-fire situation that we find ourselves in. Beyond just the normal, carnal instincts that kick-in, there is very little instinct when it comes to disciplining appropriately (and effectively), helping your kids through emotional and social issues, coaching and leading them and helping them process through things as they come up, instilling character, etc. A lot of us simply draw from the arsenal of techniques and ways used by our parents or parent-figures (good or bad). With a now 8 and 9 year-old, I am confronted with these issues everyday. Are my expectations for them too high? Am I being too strict or not strict enough? Should I use more positive reinforcement this time around or would negative reinforcement be better? Am I giving them the right advice? Do I show them enough affection or tell them I'm proud of them and love them often enough? Do they respect me? Am I really setting a good example as far as showing them what being a true disciple of Jesus looks like? Am I doing a good job at demonstrating to them that Jesus is my treasure and not my job, my hobbies, my possessions, the way I handle suffering as it comes up, etc.? It's a job that requires a lot of discernment and a lot of grace. It's often daunting.

I remember when I was a kid, I used to see adults as people who really seemed to have things together and always knew what to do. Now as an adult with kids, it is obvious I was giving adults more credit than they deserved! We don't have it all together and it's somewhat true that we are all just kids in adults clothes. I mean think about it, what tendencies or behaviors do we revert to when we don't get our way or when we're tired, hungry, or angry? Maybe you still feel a little jumpy if you have to walk across your house when it's completely dark? If there's one thing I have learned since being a parent, I am sunk without grace and just straight divine intervention. That's an extremely cliché thing to say, but it doesn't make it any less true. I need real Wisdom, not earthly wisdom. I need

the power of the Holy Spirit, not the power of my flesh. I need real in-the-moment discernment, not just logic or sheer human faculties.

With all that said, here's just one thing I've recently learned and have put it in my tool belt. I've realized that I don't just have to lean on my own God-given authority when it comes to training/coaching/leading my kids or addressing issues as they come up. I can lean on God's Sovereign authority over not just me and my kids, but everything. I have one, recent example of what I mean and then I will end this post. Last week, I picked the kids up from school and as I usually do, I asked them how their day went. They gave a few of their normal responses and then one of them mentioned a particular kid who was mean again that day. They have brought this person up before and it's always to say how mean they are to them and to other kids. My kids then proceed to start bashing the kid and slandering them—holding nothing back. They just straight up let their words fly without any filters or reservations. In the moment, if I'm honest, I had to force myself to not be lazy at the end of the day and try to help them process the situation and walk through it with them so they could view it rightly and also honor Jesus in their response to it. The kid they were talking about probably is a legitimately “mean” kid, but I wanted to train them how to properly deal with sinful people in their everyday lives.

So I start rattling off some advice. Hey, although that kid was a jerk to you guys and is most of the time, let's not sit around and just start bashing them and roasting them. You guys should choose your words carefully and realize that your words are weighty and should not just be used casually. I say something about how our words can inflict a lot of damage and do a lot of pain, that our tongues are actually very powerful although they are of little account. So they kind of say, yeah, yeah, yeah, we know Dad. I could tell they were thinking: This is just Dad speaking here. And I think they respected my authority on the subject to a degree, but it didn't quite have the impact that I think it needed. In my mind, I had been drawing all my instruction from James 3. So the instruction I was giving them wasn't just my words, but they were God's words in Scripture, on his Authority. I felt a little nudge to mention that to them (since I could tell it wasn't really sinking in deep

enough) that hey, these aren't just Daddy's words, these are God's words. So I busted out my phone and went to James 3 and began reading it to them:

"2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,

8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?

12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water." – James 3:2-12

Not only is James 3:2-12 a very practical set of verses with just straight-up, sound wisdom, it also has a lot of good imagery that catches a kid's attention; like Fire, and horses, and ships, and animals, and fig trees, etc. And as I was reading it I could see it sinking into them deeper and carrying more authority with it, and there was a visible change in their demeanor and body language. It was encouraging. It left a bit deeper impression on them than our normal "coachable" moments together and it was then that I thought to myself,

“why don’t I bust out the Bible when it comes to parenting them, more often?” It not only made it easier for me, but it was also more effective than if I had just merely done it on my own and backed it with my own authority. And not only that, I want them to be going to their Bibles (myself included) regularly as “life” happens. I can assure you, leaning on scripture when it comes to my parenting will certainly be a new tool in my arsenal. It not only lightens the burden on a parent, it is more effective than anything parents can try to accomplish through their own abilities and faculties. We can give the Bible functional authority in our lives!

The sin of longing to be inaccessible (aka the ‘Get off my lawn mentality’).

May 31, 2018

Have you ever wished you could build a perimeter around your house and make it difficult for people to be able to walk up to your front door and start knocking? I have, just now, about 10 minutes ago and many times prior to that. It sounds kind of funny, but it’s also kind of not. I’m not talking about boundaries and personal space and all that. Obviously, those things are good and important and not necessarily sinful. But if the overall position and proclivity of your heart is “get off my lawn” all the time, it could be a good indicator that something’s off. It’s common to get people-ed out from time to time, but having a bent towards it is something to pray about.

We have neighbor kids that come knocking on our door (quite frequently) to see if our kids would like to play. Usually it’s right after we get home from work/school, and I tend to be a little crispy by that time of the day after being drained from work. I don’t know if you’ve experienced this, but most kids aren’t very good at closing doors, which doesn’t bode well in Florida heat and humidity. Let’s just say I start to get a little irritable and anxious when kids come over and start going in and out of the house. It stretches me a bit and I have to be 100% intentional to be hospitable in those moments. It would be great to be hospitable in those moments with little to know action of the will. One mark of a true Christian is seeking to show hospitality (Rom. 12:13). So I think even if you’re not feeling it, you can seek to show hospitality, and so that’s simply all I try to do with the hope that Jesus would heal and carry my heart along in that so that it’s genuine overflow accompanied with gladness.

I think as Christians, it’s right to keep ourselves open, (dare I say) even at great cost. And I mean to actually gladly and willingly keep ourselves open. Not joylessly like, “well, I guess I’m supposed to open up my home and life to people because that’s what a good Christian does.” Here’s to more joy in being spent for people!

My Psalm 63 ‘Mixtape’

July 14, 2018

Part of being rooted like the tree described in Jeremiah 17 is having truths to grip onto during both life’s tumult’s, and zeniths. I used to be so excited about putting together mixtapes/CD’s back in the 90s and early-2000s. What did we do? We essentially compiled a track of our most treasured songs. Like, you just knew everybody’s mind would be blown by listening to your mixed tape because you had chosen the creme a la creme of songs. It can be the same with God’s Truth and with quotes from past and present stewards of His Truth. Except it’s a compilation not just for other people’s minds to be blown, but rather, your own mind. C.H. Spurgeon put’s it so eloquently:

“An ointment for every wound, a cordial for every faintness, a remedy for every disease. Blessed is he who is well-skilled in heavenly pharmacy and knows how to lay hold on the healing virtues of the promises of God.”

It is good to have an arsenal of truths and sayings for all life’s seasons. I have been in a particularly difficult season, so I have found comfort in meditating on Psalm 63. I’ve also been on a pretty good C.H. Spurgeon binge currently, which is rather timely because Spurgeon was a man well-acquainted with grief, most of his life. I love his commentary on Psalm 63 and so here are just a few of my gleanings from his exposition (VV. 1, 3, and 6). They’re my Psalm 63 “mixed tape,” so to speak.

V1. O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Spurgeon: “...Firm faith enables him to claim him [God] as his own. He has no doubts about his possession of his God; and why should other believers have any?”

“Observe the eagerness implies; he will not wait for noon or for the cool eventide; he is up at cockcrow to meet his God. Communion with God is so sweet that the chill of the morning is forgotten and the luxury of the couch is despised.”

"A weary place and a weary heart make the presence of God the more desirable; if there be nothing below and nothing within to cheer, it is a thousand mercies that we may look up and find all we need

V3. "Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you."

Spurgeon: Life is dear, but God's Love is dearer.

"We ought not to make our praises of God to depend upon our own personal and present reception of benefits; this would be mere selfishness; even publicans and sinners have a good word for those whose hands are enriching them with gifts; it is the true believer only who will bless the Lord when he takes away his gifts or hides his face.

V6. when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

Spurgeon: "If day's cares tempt us to forget God, it is well that night's quiet should lead us to remember him."

It is good to have God's truths to cling to in life's pits. Thankful to be able to find comfort in David's hymn during a time of suffering he experienced while in this wilderness. On Earth, we are always in the wilderness!

Just Some Recent Reflections

July 21, 2018

About 17 people perished yesterday when a small boat cap-sized in Branson, Missouri. Can you imagine what the families and friends of those people must be going through? We like to separate ourselves as far from death as possible. We tend to do this with all of life's unpleasantries, but especially death. This isn't a revolutionary observation. We know this to be true. We distance ourselves from it. We tell ourselves it's far-off, in the future. Whenever thoughts about death or dying come to mind, we try to replace them with happy, distracting thoughts. And if people start talking about death, we quickly change the subject, or even chastise them for even going 'there.'

The opposite principle is true for pleasant things, right? If you are about to get married, you hasten the day and talk about it in such a way to make the time between now and the event seem shorter. If you are going on vacation, you long for the time off and get excited about spending time at your destination. We hasten the reward and shun the unpleasant. We are always trying to comfort ourselves as we move along through this life in the here and now. Anything that makes us uncomfortable, we rid of. Anything that makes us feel pleasure or happiness, we draw close. When we're in a particularly wonderful season of life, we try to draw it out as long as possible; we grasp it tightly. Whenever we're in a season of suffering or a time of great agony, we want to hurry-it-along as quickly as possible and get through it. Isn't this interesting? Do you think this behavior works to our advantage or our disadvantage in light of eternity?

The Christian desires great nearness to Jesus and hopes and longs for eternity; to be delivered from his/her weak body. Death isn't a fearful thing to the Christian. His hope is in the life to come, not this one. The opposite is true for the non-Christian. He/She fears death. He preserve this earthly life at all costs. He casts himself as far away from Jesus as possible, because He (to whom we must all one day give an account), seems dreadful. A life of works or "true religion" seems pitiable and lacking in enjoyment. He puts all of his hope

into the offerings of this world. To paraphrase C.H. Spurgeon (because he puts things so well), you will never hear of a Christian on his death bed regretting or lamenting a life spent in nearness to Jesus or of striving after righteousness. However, you will often see the man or woman who lived a life of striving after their own desires in a journey of unrepentant sin, full of great regret and melancholy.

As Christians, we have much to look forward to. Our hope is not in this life or this world. The former things are passing away and a new order of things is coming. Eventually, all of us alive today (whether in Christ or not) will die and days and months and years will dissolve away as we begin eternity. The things that were once important and so dear to us, will no longer be. We will be separated from them. This is also an individual experience. We have to go from the 'now' into eternity alone, without company. Again, we 'put this off' from us. It's unpleasant. Morbid. Depressing. I turn 30 next month. Based on average life expectancy, I should have a good 45 years left. Maybe. However, most people I talk to that are already up in age (70s, 80s, and 90s) have said that life goes by so fast—like a blink. We hear these things, and of course we dismiss them. But then, every once in awhile, even in our young age, we are confronted with death. Maybe every couple years with the passing of aging family members or with sudden, unexpected losses of close friends. We pass by a cemetery one morning on a drive and are struck by reality. When a boat capsizes and 17 people perish.

Jesus has been teaching me. Remember, for the Christian, He works ALL things together for our good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). Experiencing the loss of my father recently 'snapped' me back into reality, out of a more devil-may-care existence. He's teaching me many things recently. Some things He's teaching me have yet to play-out or are less visible, but I know he is preparing me for an eternal weight of glory beyond all compare (2 Cor. 4:17), just as He did so for my Dad when he was in his affliction the last 4 years. Depressing things happen in this life and a melancholy response is appropriate when those things happen. It is an evil thing to sing in a time when gloom and sadness is appropriate (Ecc. 3:1-8). And the Proverb says, "Whoever sings songs to a

heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda” (Prov. 25:20).

Charles Spurgeon was well aware that the soul and mind can experience much greater, much deeper, and longer lasting affliction than the rest of the body. And injury to soul and mind can happen over and over again, whereas the body after being stabbed or shot so many times, will die. Bereavement isn't the only thing that causes deep trouble of heart and soul. Abandonment, betrayal, and entanglement in sin can cause great sorrow of heart. David and (more importantly) Jesus, were both well-acquainted with grief:

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the LORD; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying, my soul refuses to be comforted. When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. -Ps. 77:1-3

Isaiah says of Jesus,

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

But there is hope for the Christian. As Spurgeon said, and as many Christians have throughout history done, we can “plead the promises of God.” However, whenever we get into a particularly dark season, as one recent author in a book I’m reading puts it,

Promises can rouse our cynicism. We once hoped in them, but now they resemble throwaway pennies, scrap papers or leftover bolts shoved away in the junk drawer. And yet, our need to reorient our lives around the risk of promises remains necessary, even if our relationship with promises reveals only our painful questions about them. Why? Because promises of a certain kind are like voices or realistic hope that intrude into our dungeon thoughts. They are ‘precious and very great,’ given as gifts to us from God (2 Pet. 1:4). Our souls need them. – Zach Eswine, Spurgeon’s Sorrows

So I will end with some hopeful verses, that as Christians, we can cling to when we are deeply vexed in spirit due to the heavy cares of life:

“He will deliver us from the pit” (Ps. 40:2).

“Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:11).

“The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Ps. 35:18)

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4).

And 3 particular verses that I shared with my Dad during his last 4 years, and especially during his last few weeks:

“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen” (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

“For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (1 Thess. 5:9).

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21)

Livin' that Whack-a-mole Life

August 14, 2018

I have to admit, my posts have been somewhat serious or even borderline melancholy lately, but I've decided that's not necessarily a bad thing. This post is no exception. It's been a tough season for Theresa and I, but it's also been a tough decade or so—marked with suffering along the road of obedience, but also suffering along the road of folly. Regardless of the source of our suffering, the last decade has been peppered with heartaches, disappointments, and calamities. This most recent season of suffering, however, has sharpened our sense of reality a bit more. I have felt more aware of ultimate reality than I ever have—and by God's design. I still see dimly (that is another post all together as the word 'dimly' keeps coming up in praying, reading, listening, and from dear friends) though. All we get on this side of eternity is a seeing 'dimly.' Nonetheless, I'm not saying I see ultimate reality clearly, but what I am saying is that my seeing of ultimate reality has been clearer than it has ever been; and it is directly the result of great sorrow and suffering; wrought by God so that I may indeed taste and see Him more clearly.

Rivers flow into oceans over and over and the waters never come to their rest. Due to the Earth's tilt on its axis, the atmosphere never reaches a state of equilibrium. It's like a moving target. The seasons constantly change. Summer fades to fall, fall fades to winter, and winter fades to spring. Clouds form and dissipate. Such is reality and the order of current things. There is no ultimate conclusion or organization of things on this planet. Trying to order and control these things, especially our lives is like trying to grab onto a cloud and take-hold of it. This is why Solomon describes life like a vapor. You cannot lay-hold of it. I know, for any science people, clouds are condensed water vapor, so clouds aren't the perfect analogy, but you catch my drift.

So lately, I've thought to myself, "Yeah, having a better understanding of reality is cool, but what am I supposed to then "do" with that understanding? If there's one thing I want, I would sure like to get free from thinking there is some different reality to be had! It may

not be the way I prefer reality, but reality is reality. And I know that somehow because of God's Sovereignty and his infinite wisdom, it's the "best" way for things to be from an eternal perspective. That itself is also another topic. Sometimes life feels like the game "Whack-a-mole." Just when you get one thing resolved, 3 more things pop-up. I just want to get enough money in my savings account, I want everything in my house fixed (at the same time), I want everything neat and tidy and in order and just as I want it to be and I want it to stay like that forever. I want everyone in my family to be healthy. It all sounds silly on paper, but I promise you that is the posture of my heart and the main expectation of my life 99% of the time. I just want everything to be easy with no stress, no worries about the future, no uncertainty, I want everything to be predictable, and then I will be good. I want to mow my grass and it stay the same height so I never have to mow it again and I want my freshly organized landscape free of weeds to never have weeds in it ever again. I want to continually build on what people think of me, so that my reputation is increasingly better.

If there's one thing I've learned though, trying to achieve equilibrium in life is a fool's errand. It won't happen for most of us; especially those who God loves. Thanks be to God that he doesn't allow complete equilibrium in our lives. We trade in equilibrium for something much better, that brings actual, true peace—Jesus himself. My hope is that someday I quit carrying out this fool's errand. This is a topic I feel like I could write much on, but I will refrain for now. My hope is simply for Jesus to be enough and to make it to the end. And I'll enjoy some things along the way as well.

Going to the Mountaintop

August 31, 2018

Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the face. – Mike Tyson

Mike Tyson may be slightly insane, but he is right about getting punched in the face. I've experienced some substantial changes this year; particularly over the last few months. I've wondered, does our theology (and not just theology, but our faith) have the "legs" to go the distance and stand through whatever life would throw our way? You may think I only have suffering in mind, but I'm referring to ANYTHING life would throw at us; whether lack OR abundance, and everything in between. Sometimes abundance, success, and comfort can be a greater test of our faith than being brought low, or enduring suffering or experiencing lack. For example, you see New Testament believers in the Bible giving out of their poverty:

"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." – 2 Corinthians 8:1-2

Conversely, you see (in the words of Jesus) how difficult it is for a rich man or woman to enter the kingdom of heaven:

"The young man said to him, 'All these [commands] I have kept. What do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.'" – Matthew 19:20-24

And in the Old Testament we see the risks that abundance poses to our faith:

“And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” -Deuteronomy 6:10-12

You’ve seen both sides of the spectrum play-out in someone’s life (maybe your own). Sometimes a promotion with a bigger salary can be just as much of a threat or hindrance to our faith as the loss of a loved one, or sickness, bankruptcy, relational conflict, temptation, habitual unrepentant sin, etc. The days grind at us and steal “life” from us. By the end of most days, I’m usually pretty spent. Many things can happen in the course of just one day. For example, I was already flipped off by someone by 7:45am a couple days ago while driving to work. I suspect because the driver thought I was driving too slow (I’m often accused of this by my wife and kids, but that’s another discussion...haha). I was able to laugh it off, but things like this happen throughout our day and they begin to accumulate. And the only reason I was able to laugh it off that morning was because I had just spent some time with Jesus. Had I not been to the mountaintop that morning, I may have reacted differently to see that guy’s middle finger stuck up at me out the window. And believe me, on the mornings or days where I haven’t been to the mountaintop, I’m not nearly as gracious to someone that sins against me. Does my relationship with Jesus have the legs to make it through the end of the day, the week, the month, the year, my life?

I sure hope so. We don’t know what life is going to throw at us—good or bad. We can only trust in God’s “keeping” us to the end. To paraphrase John Piper (who said it well), he thanks God for his keeping of us whenever we are old in age, struck with dementia and out of our minds, not making any sense. Going on church plants, taking up your cross and following Jesus, getting married, etc. can seem like a “good plan” or a worthy endeavor, until your flesh, the world, and the evil one punch you right square in the face. Big money, church pain, health, lack of health, peace, trouble, and so on will test the genuineness of our faith. We cannot just be well-versed in theology or have a good plan. We have to truly

know and be in love with Jesus if we expect to make it to the end and not just “make it,” but have joy in the midst of intense poverty or great wealth. If our love for Jesus and our desiring him above all things (not to go all Christian Hedonist on everybody) is constantly growing, we will endure anything life throws at us. Communing with Jesus is often times the decisive factor. Christianity is a relationship and is about abiding in Jesus and Him in us:

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” – John 15:4-5

Interestingly, Jesus didn’t end there in talking about “abiding.” We are also supposed to love and confide in each other (as the Church) as it says a few verses later in John 15:12. It is very difficult to do well spiritually outside of real, Christian relationship. Christian community has become a “buzz word” these days, but it is true that it’s essential to living out our faith and it is the way God designed it. We are supposed to use our gifts to encourage one another and build each other up. God uses people as a means to display His love and to comfort us:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” – 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Abiding in Jesus and loving and confiding in one another will persevere us through whatever life brings, even if it feels like we’ve “received the sentence of death.”

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves...” – Matthew 10:16

Be warmed by the fire of God's promises

November 3, 2018

Aside from the way Christians love one another, I believe that one of the other primary ways a person demonstrates whether they belong to Christ is by their response during suffering, trials, and hardship. And beyond just suffering well (yet imperfectly), another distinguishing mark of a good tree is a person's perspective on trials and suffering. *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produced steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).* A Christian's aim is to "count it all joy" when trials come, for we should *know* (by faith) that the testing of our faith is making us more like Christ. There are truths and promises of God that we hold fast to as Christians that inform our thinking and our response to the things that happen to us in this life. You cannot simply just make yourself "count it all joy" when trials come. You must actually believe through faith in Jesus that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and leads to eternal life (that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing). How about some specific promises/truths to inform our hearts and minds?

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives (Hebrews 12:5-6).

...He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3-7).

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen (2

Corinthians 4:17-18).

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

Do you *really* believe these promises? Do you stake everything you have on them? I know for me, historically, I would say I believe these truths but my *functional* theology says otherwise. Anytime we have fear, in that very exact moment when we're feeling fearful, we are failing to believe the promises of God and that he is who he says he is as revealed in scripture. And a lot of the decisions I make and the motives of my heart come "out of" these fears. I think it is possible, as Christians, to truly believe these promises moment-by-moment and operate out of those moment-by-moment "trustings" of God's promises. I'm not saying we will trust God perfectly in this life, but I do believe we can experience a great deal of freedom from the bondage of self-awareness. Self-awareness leads to fear and a realization that we have very little control over our circumstances (because we are not God).

How about seeing a trusting of God's promises in the midst of hardship in action?

Habakkuk's song of rejoicing in the Lord is a good example:

Though the fig tree not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on high places.

Thomas Watson, an old Puritan puts it this way in describing a lover of God: *They can bear the want of anything but God's presence. They can do without health and friends, they can be happy without a full table, but they cannot be happy without God.*

Have you ever felt this way about God? Can you really do without anything except God's presence? Habakkuk is able to not only withstand such loss of livelihood, but he is able to rejoice in God in the midst of it, because he BELIEVES in his salvation in God that is being "kept in heaven for him" (1 Peter 1:4-5). He believes that God is his strength (But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' – 2 Cor. 12:9) and that God strengthens and prospers him (but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint -Isa. 40:31).

What about Job? Then Job *arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed by the name of the Lord. In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong (Job 1:20-22).*

Job didn't charge God with wrong. He did not sin in the midst of his suffering, though we do know later on that he wasn't perfect in his response to his suffering. Nonetheless, he is another example of trusting in the promises of God and belief in the character and nature of God. Although Job wasn't able to look behind the curtain at the time, we are able to by reading the full account of what happened. God allowed Satan to test Job. Again, this shows God's sovereignty. We cannot begin to grasp all the mysteries of God, but we can trust him. If you are a Christian, you can believe that every single thing (good or bad) that comes into your life is for your ultimate good and is in some way making you more like Jesus. I love how Thomas Watson puts it in his commentary on Romans 8:28:

All things work together for good. This expression 'work together' refers to medicine. Several poisonous ingredients put together, being tempered by the skill of the apothecary, make a sovereign medicine, and work together for the good of the patient. So all God's providences, being divinely tempered and sanctified, work together for the best to the saints. He who loves God and is called according to his purpose, may rest assured that everything in the world shall be for his good. This is a Christian's cordial, which may warm him—make him like Jonathan, who when he had tasted the honey at the end of the rod, 'his eyes were enlightened' (1 Sam. 14:27).

I like that word “warm” a Christian. The promise and truth of Rom. 8:28 should “warm” us. If we really believe that this is what God is doing in his creation (and that he’s intimately and joyfully involved in our lives), we will most certainly feel “warm and fuzzy.” And when I say warm and fuzzy, I mean warm and fuzzy. We can feel like a child who is being held in the arms of an all-powerful and all-loving Father (Psalm 91:4). A Father who is pleased with us and wants to prosper us (Jer. 29:11).

Is there anything that can possibly make you feel any more warm and fuzzy than a perfect Father who has dominion over everything with all power and authority who would stoop down ever-so gently and cup you in his hand? A Holy God who is an all-consuming fire who possesses such strength and might, yet is able to hold you without crushing you? We do not fully-grasp the nature of our God. This is what makes heaven “heaven.” No longer having to fend for ourselves; no longer worrying about what’s next to come out from behind the bushes; no longer having to be so self-aware and wondering what other people think about us. Getting to rest in the shadow of our Father’s company is what makes heaven, heaven. So if you often find yourself wavering to trust in the promises of God like me, what can you do? One word: Pray. As Charles Spurgeon would say, “*What is prayer but the promise pleaded?*” As Christians we simply “plead” the promises of God so that God would cause the Promises to be woven into every fiber of our being, so that even in the midst of cold dark winter, we can be warmed as if huddling next to a cozy fire. For those who are not children of the promise, the fire burns. But for those who belong to the Father, the fire warms us.

How about the comforts of Psalm 23? *The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides still waters...even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

God will weave these promises into us. You can trust that the work he began in you will be brought to completion (Philippians 1:6). He is the one that is faithful and unchanging. You can stake everything you have on Him. When darkness veils his lovely face, you can rest

on his unchanging grace; in every high and stormy gale your anchor holds within the veil.
He's a solid rock on which to stand, all other ground is sinking sand.

What makes you strong?

February 10, 2019

Would you consider yourself to be a strong person? If so, what is the source of your strength? Have you ever thought about this? For some, their source of strength may be their family or their upbringing. For others, it may be their commitment to morality, a particular cause, good looks, education/intellect, income, a healthy marriage, actual physical strength, reputation, lack of a criminal record, a perceived view of one's self as being a pretty "good" person, etc. What is one thing that all of those attributes have in common? They're not static. In other words, what happens to a person's strength if those things cease or are absent?

The truth is, none of us are actually strong on our own accord. Unless a person's strength rests in their identity as a son or daughter of God, they are by nature very weak. There is no true strength apart from Jesus. Anything built on anything other than Jesus is a shaky foundation. Feeling strong based on what we can accomplish on our own leads to pride and arrogance. Have you ever been depressed? I'm not talking about sad for a couple days about something, but actually depressed? Like, where you feel hopeless, don't want to eat and want to lay in bed all day (if you could) for months or years? Have you ever struggled with drug abuse/alcohol abuse?

Generally, "strong" people tend to look down upon "weak" people. We tend to think, you have the strong people over here on this side (which is the side I'm on), then you have the weak people over here on this side. "Strong" people tend to think things like: "Why are they so depressed? Can't they just like, get over it?" or they will think: "Why would someone give themselves over to drugs or alcohol? Don't they know what that leads to? I can't believe someone would do that." "Geez, you did that thing again? Haven't we been down this road a hundred times? Will you just stop it already?"

Haven't we all thought some of these things, at least from time-to-time? It's almost hard-wired into me to think this way. I think this is one reason why Job's friends were such

miserable comforters. When we read books like Job, we tend to not think of ourselves as being like his miserable comforters. Or how about the Pharisees? You know, those who clean the outside of the cup, but are full of poison and are dirty on the inside? Most of the time, our perception of ourselves isn't very accurate.

Shifting from this type of thinking doesn't come naturally to most of us, even after we have been saved by Jesus. I think it is something that at least in some sense, has to be learned over time, or at least that's been the case with me through walking alongside people and facing the depths of my own sinfulness, weaknesses, and spiritual infirmities. The Bible actually describes all people as being "bruised reeds" (Isa. 42:3). We are bruised reeds apart from Jesus, and we remain as bruised reeds even after we're saved by Jesus, until we are made completely new in the end. I don't walk around fields seeing many bruised reeds nowadays, but it's safe to say that bruised reeds aren't very strong. I can picture what one looks like in my mind. They're very fragile and vulnerable. Some of us, even as Christians, are a little more bruised than others. The Church should hold a special place for these reeds in their hearts. They require extra-care, extra-attention, patience, and forbearance.

How does Jesus treat bruised reeds and smoking flax's?

"A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench." – Isaiah 42:3.

We have an opportunity as believers to demonstrate Jesus' disposition towards the weak and those with physical and spiritual infirmities by showing them comfort and patience, by weeping alongside them, avoiding trite language and platitudes, and showing them kindness. Although it helps if you yourself have been through many of the same types of experiences as a person who suffers with many weaknesses and infirmities, it is not a requirement. I believe all Christians are called to be gentle and associate with the lowly (Rom. 12:6). The "strong" have an obligation to bear with the weak (Rom. 15:1). This is what we saw Jesus do over and over during his ministry. He regularly rebuked the "strong," if you remember and frequently showed kindness and compassion to the weak.

Now, it is true that we can become strong. Like possess real strength. But realize, this is by God's power, not our own. God's strength is made perfect in our weaknesses. Somehow, we can be both weak and strong simultaneously as Christians. It again, is one of the "tensions" we see in the Christian life. Our strength and power made available to us through Jesus should not puff us up with conceit. I believe this is one reason why Jesus rebuked his disciples when they came back rejoicing that the demons were subject to them (Luke 10:17). Jesus told them to rejoice rather because their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). Everything a Christian has, he has been given from God. There truly is no reason to boast, but in Christ alone.

There is good news for us bruised reeds. Not only can we be made strong through Jesus, as we make our way through this life towards the Celestial City, but Jesus has great patience with us. His mercies are new every morning (Lam 3:23). He will not break us. And though our faith may only be as bright as a faintly burning wick at times, he will not snuff us out. What an opportunity we have as Christians to show the same type of tenderness and care to one another and to the world.

Relentless Commitment

August 26, 2019

Six months have passed since I last posted on this blog. Life tends to move rather quickly. The last 6 months have kind of led to a crescendo; it seems that one thing Jesus has been teaching me through hardship, high demands, and spiritual dullness is this theme of commitment. Wouldn't you agree that we make a lot of "commitments" in life without really committing? We make commitments to spouses, friends, our children, churches, employers, relatives, ourselves, gyms, etc. and a lot of times we fall short on those commitments. Jesus has been teaching me about commitment to **people**.

He is relentlessly committed to us:

"37 Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety.

38 And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

39 I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.

40 I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.

41 I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul." -Jeremiah 32:37-41

"It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed." – Deuteronomy 31:8

"And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." – Matthew 28:20b

Just to list a few verses. There is a security and an assurance that one can have when you believe such promises. That's important in life and relationship, right? Would you feel more secure in your relationship with a person if you knew that no matter what, they're

not going to throw in the towel with you when things get tough or if conflict and hardship come? I believe we are very much supposed to reflect God's relentless commitment to us in our relationships with each other, especially those of the household of faith, and our relatives.

We should be able to say, "come hell or high water, I'm sticking it out!" And we should verbalize this to each other, often! This is how God treats His people, and for that, I am eternally grateful. I am thankful God is for me and is in my corner. Sometimes I have had to sit my son down when he's exhibited bad behavior, look him in the eye, and assure him, "I'm not going anywhere! I'm committed to you, son, and I will always love you no matter what." Because of God's relentless commitment to me, I am then capable of that commitment to others. I do not carry this out flawlessly, but I think we should all, with at least some level of assurance, "feel" tangibly, this commitment to people. It's a visceral thing.

This can be a wonderful and powerful way to display the Gospel in our relationships. Can I be so bold as to say that I think it is so integral to the life of a Christian, that this type of relentless commitment demonstrates to us whether we are actually Christians? How could we not love in such a way and say that His love abides in us? I'm not saying there aren't legitimate, "outs." But ultimately, you don't have to always choose the "out," just because you have one. Thank God he didn't take his justified "out" when it came to me!

Keeping the Commands

December 22, 2019

I remember listening to a John Piper podcast a year or two ago talking about the importance of the commandments throughout the New Testament. The cliff notes version of Piper's teaching is this: You only get half a Gospel if you only focus on Jesus' blood-bought Grace, but not Jesus' blood-bought empowerment for us to obey the commandments. In other words, Jesus not only purchased the forgiveness of our sins—reconciling us to God the Father, but he also purchased our ability to follow God's commands (joyfully) and to live righteously; in a way that is pleasing to Him. This really struck me. I am so thankful for unmerited favor and for receiving God's Grace through faith and not initially my works, but it doesn't end there. There's more to what Jesus has accomplished for us. Did you know there are hundreds of commandments (not merely 'suggestions') in the New Testament? If anything, the NT raises the bar even higher. Commandment-keeping (joyful commandment-keeping) is a fruit/indicator that we are indeed saved sinners.

1 John is a book I have recently been digging into and is a great book of the Bible to zoom-in on regarding this topic. The overall theme of the book is essentially this: **How can you know you are of the household of faith? If you have these fruits in your life...**

Walking in the light as he is in the light...(1:6-7)

Confessing your sins...(1:9)

Commandment-keeping and doing what pleases God (2:3 and 3:22)

Walking in the way Jesus walked (2:6)

Loving your brother (2:9, 4:7, and 4:20)

Having the Spirit of God in you (4:13)

Confessing that Jesus is the Son of God (4:15)

Joy in God's commands (they are not burdensome) and overcoming the world (5:3-4).

Indicators that you may not be a Christian:

Love of the world: the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and pride of life (2:15-17)

You make a practice of sinning (3:4-9 and 5:18)

You do not **practice** righteousness (3:10)

Having the world's goods and not helping a brother in need (3:17)

So what then?

If you're like me, it was pretty hard to read through those commands and not feel some conviction. If we're honest, we are all weak or struggle in at least 1 or more of these areas. We should use the scriptures to examine ourselves to see if we are indeed in the faith. We aren't just forgiven of sin and reconciled to God to just then sin so grace would abound...

1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. – Romans 6:1-4

We then, after experiencing God's Grace, walk in newness of life (joyful commandment-keeping/righteous living). It is not legalism to walk in newness of life. Sometimes, we are so afraid of being legalists, we err too far the other way and throw the baby out with the bath water I am afraid. We can joyfully keep the commandments by the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus' work. Joyful commandment-keeping is evidence we are indeed His. Faith and works are commingled together (James 2:18-26). You do not have faith apart from works. Rather, you show your faith by your works. Don't neglect the commandments of the NT out of fear of legalism. If the overall trajectory of your life has

been and continues to be characterized by joyful (yet imperfect) commandment-keeping, you can rest assured that you are His!

2020–2022

The Long Grind

COVID, a stressful leadership job, and a slow unraveling I
couldn't quite name yet wore me down until I finally had to
admit I was running on empty.

Solomon's Unrepentance

June 12, 2020

1 Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, 2 from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love.

3 He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. 4 For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. 5 For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites.

6 So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done.

7 Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. 8 And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods. – 1 Kings 11:1-8

Don't you have certain movies or stories that you've seen or read a million times, but somehow you always think or hope or wish the narrative is going to somehow go a different (better direction) "this" time? Like maybe somehow Mufasa isn't going to die this time around (I was hopeful there was going to be a small re-write in the live action version). There are many narratives throughout scripture where I wish things played out differently. You don't have to get very far into the Bible (Genesis 3) before you see the Fall of Man. It's painful. Over and over and over in the scriptures (we see true narratives) of people blowing it.

Solomon is one of those people. Something stuck out to me this time around in reading about Solomon's turning away from the LORD: It's obvious his "turning away" was over a

fairly significant period of time; not in just one fell swoop.

*“He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart.”
(1 Kings 11:3)*

“Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem.” (1 Kings 11:7)

You don't marry 700 unbelieving wives and build high places for false gods overnight. I would think this had to happen over a period of years. It would seem as if God was pretty quiet towards Solomon's disobedience and unrepentance over that period of time and it wasn't until it had been going on for quite some time before God spoke to him about it and brought judgement. I'm not quite 100% sure what to make of that, but I do think there are a few lessons that can be drawn from this:

1. God is VERY, VERY patient and slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love (psalm 103:8, 2 Pet. 3:9, 1 Cor. 13:4).

God has a very long fuse (as opposed to us, who have very short fuses). There is no one more patient than he is and his kindness in dealing with us is meant to lead us to repentance. He is not a loose cannon nor does he have knee-jerk reactions.

2. He is always observing: “For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.” (2 Chronicles 16:9)

God is always observing. Whereas we judge people by their outward appearance, God judges by the heart. He does this over a period of time and even sends tests to see what we will do or how we will respond. He doesn't always address things immediately.

3. He is not mocked: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. (Galatians 6:7-8)

The world is setup in such a way that there is this principle of reaping and sowing. When it comes to reaping anything, it's usually over an extended period of time. That is true (in principle, not in every case), whether you're talking about reaping good fruit or bad fruit, righteousness or sin. Solomon sows idolatry and sexual sin over a period of time, with little to no consequence evident for awhile (at least in this text) before God brings justice.

All of us are guilty of these things (even if it's more of a microcosm in comparison to Solomon here). Sometimes we sow things we know are contrary to Truth and somehow expect that there's going to be a different outcome in the narrative. It could be sowing something we've tried many times before that ultimately leads to destruction in our lives; like somehow the narrative is going to be different this time around. As many times as we've tried to "cheat the system," it has failed. Sin (and the enemy) promise us we can cheat the system.

I love seeing myself in the characters of God's narrative in the scriptures. There's a lot of relatability. Whenever I've been trapped in periods of unrepentance, I am thankful for God's new mercies every morning to deliver me up from the pit! As believers, our aim is to keep in step with repentance by joyfully following God. And thankfully, we have the Holy Spirit which enables us. One of the other wonderful pieces of the Gospel is not just our blood bought forgiveness, but also our blood-bought ability to live a life of obedience to Jesus. It's fun to keep pulling back the infinite layers of the onion when it comes to God's mercy, power, forgiveness, and everything he has accomplished in Christ Jesus!

A Couple Thoughts on Cynicism

September 20, 2020

“Beware of cynicism. It’s such a killer. Avoid it like the plague. It will rob you of joy, of fellowship, of faith. It’s not childlike, so don’t develop it.” -Terry Virgo

I first read this tweet from Terry Virgo about 7 months ago and it really struck a chord with me. Too bad quotes or books don’t always magically fix things. Awareness does not always lead to action or change. If anything, one could argue that I have become even more cynical since first seeing this quote. To live in the world and remain unstained and childlike is a miracle. There are scores and scores of reasons to be cynical and jaded in our world. It’s not like we develop these biases for fun.

I’m not suggesting that we give up being realists, or wise, or shrewd. We must learn to be hopeful realists. Cynicism lacks “hope,” however. As Christians, we are to “hope” in God (Psalm 42:5), “hope” in redemption (Rom. 8:23), “hope” for an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison (2 Cor. 4:17), and we “hope” in God’s steadfast love; his new mercies every morning (Lam. 3:21-22). It’s not easy to keep a soft/wide heart for people. Have you ever been abandoned, betrayed, defrauded, deceived, taken advantage of, a person didn’t let you merge in traffic, etc? Ever experienced the loss of a loved one? These things happen to us regularly in our daily lives to some degree. It’s very easy to become bitter or resentful. What’s the silver bullet? Well, werewolves don’t exist and so neither does the idea of a silver bullet. There is a way to overcome the world, however. It’s certainly not a one-time, quick-fix, but it’s a path towards freedom from these things. We don’t live in a vacuum, so new sleights and sins against us continue to happen over and over again. We have to “work through” all these things, and it gets a little messy. But, we can take heart:

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” – John 16:33

Jesus has overcome the world and through Him, God bought our ability to overcome the world also by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's not just wishful thinking or trying to get books and quotes and podcasts absorbed down into us so that we overcome these things. There is real, blood-bought, spiritual power that we have access to as Christians. Cynicism will be overcome by nothing less. Many people deal with their cynicism from a worldly stand-point by rearranging their furniture in their house, yoga, meditation, the embrace of nature and the environment, diets, exercise, therapeutic endeavors, pets; you name it. All that stuff burns up real quick when something truly evil or tragic happens to you though. Life can just chew you up and spit you out sometimes. Think about Job. Would having his house all "Feng Shui" have gotten him through the loss of his kids, estate, animals, a wife that told him to curse God and die, sores all over his body, and terrible friends?

Going through life and enduring these kinds of "insults, hardships, and calamities" is exhausting and weakens us greatly. Jesus was betrayed. Paul was betrayed and done wrong by many people (I.e., Alexander the Coppersmith). These things literally make us "weak." They take life from us and can prevent us from being able to give life unless we continue to go to the source of life for more life. I write this from a place of weakness and exhaustion; as someone who is also preaching to myself through this. Oftentimes, it's not the big, major events that exhaust us and push us towards cynicism. It's all the little things that accumulate over time. Sometimes, the smaller insults, hardships, or calamities prove to be the most deadly to our faith and our hope in God. Let us with confidence be people who talk like Paul and have this type of thinking:

"8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." – 2 Corinthians 12:8-10

Saved Wretch

March 9, 2021

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? – Romans 7:24

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. – Romans 8:1-2

I love the hope that Romans 8:1-2 brings right after reading Romans 7:24. Did you know that you're a wretch, through and through? Do you actually believe that about yourself or do you think you are the exception? The truth is, "nobody does good, not even one" (Ps. 14:2-3, Rom. 3:12). It's true; you're evil and vile. Even more evil and vile than you can imagine. Even your good deeds are repulsive to God. Certainly goes against the self-esteem movement of our day. It would do us well to let ourselves marinate in the reality of our own human condition; to be quick to say things and present ourselves to others in such a way that doesn't make us look as good as we want everyone to believe we are. We would do well to "boast in our weaknesses" (2 Cor. 12:9) instead of thanking God "that we are not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even tax collectors" (Luke 18:11). As I've followed Jesus for the last 16 years, I've realized just how wretched I am more and more. No doubt, I'm less sinful today than I was 16 years ago by the Grace and work of the Holy Spirit. I've gained freedom from various sins, but it remains that sin dwells within me. Even now as I write this, my dog is whining very annoyingly and I can feel the physiological response of my flesh to this stimuli: my heart rate increasing and my body temperature rising. I really wish the dog would put a lid on it. Indeed, sin is always "crouching at the door" (Gen. 4:7); even in the midst of writing about how awful sin is!

Sin dwells within me. I do the very things I do not want to do. Back to Romans 7:

15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. 17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that

is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. – Romans 7:15-20

This is the human condition. Any desire a Christian has to do good comes from God, not us. Even if you have been following Jesus for decades; the good you do today is a Grace of God! Reading your Bible, praying, being a part of a local church, etc. over the years are not at the root of why you do the good you do today. They're not what's supplying your good works. Your knowledge of the scriptures nor your theology are the reason you do good works today. Any good works you do today are by the power of the Holy Spirit that empowers you daily. Back to Romans 8 again:

5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. – Romans 8:5-9

We are 100% dependent on God to live a life that is pleasing to him. We must be in the Spirit. Apart from him, we are just in the flesh and everything that the flesh does down to its most basic level, is evil/hostile to God. And what are the works of the flesh?

For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. – 1 John 2:16

19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. Galatians 5:19-21

We even commit sins we're not even aware of! We must not forget this as we follow Jesus. It is bad news—actually, horrible news that we are born into such a wretched and utterly

hopeless condition, but that's what makes the Gospel such good (great) news! Just as much as you should marinate in the reality of Romans 7, you should marinate in the reality of Romans 8:1:" There is therefore now no condemnation!" If you are in Jesus, you are no longer condemned. You are no longer stuck in your hopeless condition. You are no longer God's enemy or a wrench in his sight. You are actually able to obey God's commands and live a life pleasing to him, even though you still wrestle with the old man or woman within. The fact is, now you are actually "wrestling" with the old man or woman, imperfect yes, but wrestling nonetheless!

Not only are you no longer an enemy of God, but now you're a friend! God likes you. You're no longer destined for wrath:

9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. – 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10

Don't forget this or lose sight of it! 16 years later and I still find myself falling back to the simplicity of the Gospel as I reach my wits end over and over again as I follow Jesus. It's always been very easy for me to get caught up in "doing the stuff" over the years and lose sight of the greater portion: Jesus. The reality is, he doesn't need my help or my service. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills:

10 For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. 12 "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. – Psalm 50:10-12

I simply get the joy of being a part of his work of redemption. The Gospel is timeless. It never changes. He never changes. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. We're the ones who waver. We're the ones who are finicky and unstable, or "prone to wander," as the old hymn goes. The Good news is, we get to cling to Jesus, the "Rock of Ages" over and over again, and even as we fail to cling to him, he clings to us:

*28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.
29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. – John 10:28-29*

Like CH Spurgeon said, “You are a great sinner, but he is a great savior!”

Our Burdens

March 20, 2021

I remember a friend saying something some years back that really stuck with me. The cliff notes version of it is this: Whenever you come to Jesus beating yourself up about everything you're not yet in life and what you suck at in life, he doesn't give you 10 other things to do and go fix about yourself. If you ever feel that way reading your Bible or hearing Biblical teaching, such feelings are not from the Holy Spirit. They're either from you not seeing your standing before the Father rightly or they're from the adversary.

Here are some similar lines of thinking from other Gospel-centered believers:

"The solution to our numbness to God's grace is not nagging or scolding, but more grace." -Jared C. Wilson

"Another verse I can't find in the Bible: Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you a challenge." -Ray Ortlund

In other words, when you come to Jesus exhausted, thirsty, dirty, and your tail tucked between your legs, he doesn't greet you with a look of disappointment or point his finger at you. He doesn't tell you to get your act together, and "oh hey, by the way, stop doing these 10 things and go do these 10 things instead." You have to remember, although we are made in His image, he doesn't think like us or have the same limitations that we do. He doesn't treat us the way people treat people. We can find rest for our souls in His presence. Remember, we will one day "enter His rest." He "makes" us lie down in green pastures. (Ps. 23). He "leads" us beside still waters. Isn't that cool; that even when we resist His rest, he will "make" us rest anyway?! If you have a view of Jesus as a hard master or a slave driver—I promise you—you're not seeing him rightly. Enter his rest today. Let your soul be comforted and satisfied by Him. I'll end with a good quote I just heard that was from the Puritan John Flavel:

“The soul is so constituted that it craves fulfillment from things outside itself and will embrace earthly joys for satisfaction when it cannot reach spiritual ones. The believer is in spiritual danger if he allows himself to go for any length of time without tasting the love of Christ and savoring the felt comforts of a Savior’s presence. When Christ ceases to fill the heart with satisfaction, our souls will go in silent search of other lovers.”

All Things are Full of Weariness

December 20, 2021

A Context for the Experience of Weariness

“The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.”

Ecclesiastes 1:5-8

Have you ever felt like your bones are out of joint or like your heart is slowly melting in your chest like wax? Maybe it's just a subtle, low-grade feeling that persists for a period of days, weeks, months, or years. Sometimes, it can be difficult; almost impossible, to put a context to how we feel, or to our experience of the world. Over the years, the Bible has helped me put some color to how I feel emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. In transparency, I have been swimming in a sea of weariness since the beginning of the pandemic. With every stroke in that sea, I have become increasingly winded. It can be so subtle that it can go almost unnoticed, until it hits you all at once. It's not necessarily any one event, but is an accumulation of tens, hundreds, and thousands of events. “Death-by-papercut,” as they say.

Theresa and I were recently out of town celebrating our 15th anniversary. We took a subway to the airport on our final day as we headed home. It was a fairly long commute, so I had plenty of time to people-watch. We were also out of the country, so our phones didn't have any cell service. This was helpful, because I normally would have buried my face in my phone to stay entertained for the hour and half train ride. As I was observing the people around me, I noticed a sense of weariness; much like Solomon described in

[Ecclesiastes 1](#). People were likely headed to work, to see a friend, on their way to the grocery store, etc. Whatever they were doing, you could tell it wasn't the first time, but was just one of hundreds, or maybe even thousands of occurrences. Even the subway train itself looked weary. The floors and walls had scratches and tread marks from people's shoes and coat zippers. The handrails were wrought with handprints, and the seats had dings and dents. The subway makes stop-after-stop day-after-day, until it hits the end of the line, then it reverses and goes right back in the opposite direction; people coming, people going at each stop.

Just like Ecclesiastes 1, that subway ride gave me context for my current life experiences. There's a sort of vanity or futility to it all. As Christians, we know our new lives through Jesus have profound purpose and that all things work together for our good ([Rom. 8:28](#)). However, just a few verses prior, we also read that the whole creation (the rocks, the birds, the trees, mankind, etc.) has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now ([Rom. 8:22](#)). Although the Light of the world has already come, and the work is already finished, we still live in this in-between time where we don't have full redemption. Our bodies get sick, our minds get lost, our hearts melt within our chest, relationships crumble, seasons of joy turn to seasons of mourning. It's true that I've had wonderful moments sprinkled in over the last several years. However, the world still has a way of wearying all of us, including Christians. We experience disappointments, transgressions, abandonments, deaths, regrets, and on, and on.

I love many of the Psalms; especially the ones that just end without a clear resolve:

"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?...consider and answer me."

[Psalms 13](#) (shortened)

What's the Solution for Weariness?

Although David ends [Psalms 13](#) with, “I will sing to the LORD because he has dealt bountifully with me,” there isn’t an explicit resolution to his situation. His worship towards God comes from a place of faith and trust, not necessarily from a place of answered prayer. I reject the notion that things always turn out well in this life as long as you are saved by Jesus and have submitted to his will. Sometimes, life is just hard, and things don’t always go as they should. So, what’s the answer? What’s the solution? Often times, I look for that elusive “thing” that’s supposed to solve my issue. What’s the book I need to read, or the phrase I need to hear, or the sermon that needs to be preached, or the counseling session that needs to be had, in order for me to get my problem fixed? Sometimes a book, or a word of encouragement, or a sermon, or a counseling session does provide real relief (and thank God for that). But sometimes we just have to say like David, “But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

Reflections After Reading the Book Soul Keeping

February 5, 2022

The 'Rona finally got me! I am currently quarantining after testing positive for COVID yesterday. With this “forced” rest, I finished a book called “Soul Keeping,” by John Ortberg. It came heavily recommended by a great friend. I think he’d been encouraging me to read it for over a year. I finally started it a few weeks ago and took a lot of notes along the way. There’s a lot of meat on the bone, so I’m taking my time to digest all the notes. It’s now ranked in my top-3 of most insightful and influential books I’ve read.

I’m taking my time on bed rest today to outline the salient points from the book. Hopefully, you’ll find Ortberg’s insights as helpful as I have. If you’re familiar with a book that was very popular last year called “The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry,” by John Mark Comer, you would likely appreciate Soul Keeping. Interestingly, both John Mark Comer and John Ortberg were mentored by Dallas Willard, who taught them both the importance of taking care of one’s soul.

What is the Soul?

*“Let the Lord Jesus but enter your **souls**, and you shall find peace which the world can neither give nor take away.”*

George Whitfield

The soul is the spiritual part of a person. The whole person includes the mind/will, body, heart, and soul. The **soul** is made by God, for God, and can only find its satisfaction and strength in God. It’s the “life” that God breathes into our bodies (think back to Genesis).

The soul has great depth, so it has the ability to behold deep things. The soul is analogous to computer software, where the body, mind/will are the hardware. The soul is like an operating system. It integrates all parts of the whole person. As people, we are spiritual beings in a physical shell. The soul is made to live forever.

What Does the Soul Need?

It's the nature of the soul to be "needy." It's built to need God for strength and health. When we discern our soul's neediness, it's supposed to point us or "drive" us to God. Attempting to meet our soul's needs with the wrong things harms our soul. Whenever we sin, the action causes a "disintegration" of our souls with the rest of us. When we do something that goes against our conscience or something that we know is wrong, it causes harm to our souls. In order to stay healthy, **our souls need to be centered and find their identity, satisfaction, and security in God alone.**

*"As a deer pants for flowing streams, so my **soul** pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."*

Psalms 42:1-2

*"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will **never be thirsty again.**"*

John 4:13-14 (Jesus speaking to the woman at the well).

What's Good for the Soul?

- Abiding in God – Prayer and Worship
- Good Human Relationships
- Prioritizing Rest/Avoiding "Hurry" and "Rush"
- Confession of Sin
- Enjoying Nature
- Beholding Non-Superficial Things That Have Depth (Good Books, Poetry, and Music)

What Harms the Soul?

- Unrepentant Sin or Being Sinned Against.

- Superficiality and Trivial Things (i.e., Binging on Social Media, Netflix, etc.).
- Looking Upon Things That Are Evil.
- Constant Hurry
- Prayerlessness
- Allowing Disappointment, Resentment, and Bitterness to Take Residence in Our Hearts and Minds.
- Ingratitude or Feeling Entitled. Self-Pity.
- Constantly Seeking After Things (Buying/Selling Possessions, Clothes, Food, Storing Up Wealth, etc.).
- Escapism (Drugs, Alcohol, Pornography, Excessive Video Gameplay, etc.).

How Can We Tend to Our Souls?

Most of the focus in our culture is on the external. This includes the body (eating healthy/exercising), the mind (education), what possessions we have, what we do for a job, what clothes we wear, what people think about us, etc. These things tend to “clutter” our souls. Therefore, our souls are often neglected. **Neglecting our souls for months, years, or decades will catch up with us.** This is often when people experience *burnout*.

The first question to ask when thinking about how we can better tend to our souls is, “**what person am I becoming currently?**” What’s important is not what we do or what we have or what we achieve but who we’re “becoming.” What’s the trajectory of our life? Who and what we’re becoming can change from moment to moment. Whenever you lie, that can often lead to another lie, so over time, in a sense, you’re becoming a liar or a person that lacks integrity. If you’re constantly busy and your life is always hurried, you’re becoming a frantic, anxious, overly pragmatic person (think back to the story of Martha and Mary). You’re becoming a “Martha.”

“Our greatest fear should not be of failure but of succeeding at **things** in life that don’t really matter.”

Francis Chan

In other words, we can be like Mary and choose the **better** portion. Namely, Jesus. Or, we can be like Martha, choosing the **lesser** portion(s). Choosing the lesser portion consistently over time damages our souls. Why might we choose the lesser portion instead of the better one? It depends on our internal belief system. We might choose the lesser portion if we believed it would somehow be the better portion (this is the deceit of sin). These are some of the things that choke-out God.

“And others (seeds) are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”

Mark 4:18-19

The opposite of soul acceptance (from God) is **soul fatigue**. When we don't sleep well and keep drinking caffeine day after day and just keep running wide open, we set ourselves up for soul fatigue. Soul fatigue happens when you keep driving with the check engine light blinking and you never stop. It doesn't have the same signs as physical fatigue and the soul unfortunately doesn't come with a gauge.

Signs of Soul Fatigue

What is bothering you more than it should? Have you noticed yourself having less self-control? Do you favor short term gains that leave you with higher, long-term costs? Has your judgement been suffering, or have you been acting cowardly?

Prolonged soul fatigue causes the following:

- Damages the relationships with people in our lives.
- If you're married, you and your spouse begin fighting over trivial stuff.
- Nothing left in your tank to overlook your loved ones' annoying habits.
- Easily irritated.
- No energy left for relationship with God or people.

Signs of Mind Fatigue

Mind fatigue is different from soul fatigue because it's physical. It's more "external." It's caused by constantly keeping a list of mental errands that need to be completed and being bombarded with info all day (i.e., at work, via news and social media, etc.). Mental fatigue can also contribute to soul fatigue.

Will Fatigue

Like mind fatigue, **will fatigue** is more physical in nature. This is caused by having to make hundreds or thousands of important (and unimportant) decisions throughout the day. It comes from the feeling of a "need" to make decisions. Namely, what to wear, what people think about us, what we're going to buy or sell, what we're going to do as a career, what degree we're going to get, etc.). Many business owners experience will fatigue because they're constantly bombarded with decisions that "need" to be made.

Ego Depletion

When our egos are depleted, we tend to be more negative and become "extra sad" when we watch a sad movie. We find it easy to see the bad in everything and often feel hopeless. We find a way to spin everything in a negative way.

What Did Jesus Do to Keep His Soul Healthy?

The soul craves rest and only knows "borrowed" strength. Jesus kept his soul healthy by constantly abiding in the Father. The Father provided sustenance for him. Jesus regularly engaged in prayer throughout the day, had twelve friends he went through life with, studied the scriptures, enjoyed his Father's creation, and even enjoyed partying with non-religious types (note: not in a sinful way). Some questions we can ask ourselves:

- What practices connect me with God's joy, energy, and peace?
- What are my sustaining practices? Do I want to explore some new ones?

Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches. We must abide in him if we expect our souls to stay healthy and maintain their strength.

The Difference Between Being Busy and Being Hurried

There's a difference between **busyness** (external) and **hurry** (internal). Being hurried is an inner condition. A condition of the soul. Busyness migrates to hurry when we squeeze God out of our lives.

- Busy = Full Schedule
- Hurry = Preoccupied, unable to be "present." Unavailable to God.

When you're hurried, you cannot rest in God. You start worrying about tomorrow, instead of letting tomorrow worry about itself. Jesus would often intentionally slow his followers down, so their souls wouldn't be so fatigued. He would also do the same by regularly getting away to quiet and desolate places. Jesus was less hurried than any person that's ever lived. Yet, he accomplished more than anyone ever has.

Don't let the world around you "squeeze" you. The world tends to squeeze us into its mold. We must learn to withdraw from the pressures of the world. We must learn to be in solitude and shelter ourselves from noise and distraction. It's important to learn to sometimes do "nothing." By doing nothing, we're actually doing a lot.

What Do We Do During the Dark Night of Our Souls?

Nothing. We wait on God. We do less. We ask him for help. We resign from things. We rest more. We let go of our need to hurry from our desperate situation. We have other people Pray for us. We don't try to "do more." Namely, more spiritual things. We must learn to WAIT on God in those moments.

Conclusion

Jesus' invitation in **Matthew 11** is an ongoing invitation and is not just in reference to salvation:

*"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find **rest for your souls**. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Matthew 11:28-20

*"The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my **soul**."*

Psalms 23:1-3

Whenever we feel our soul's neediness, Jesus is inviting us to come to Him. He's inviting us to choose the better portion.

We Weren't Made for Rest, Rest was Made for Us

April 9, 2022

And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

Mark 2:27

Whether you're a Christian or not, listen up. If you don't find some kind of rhythm of rest in your life, you're going to damage your soul, your relationships, and your life.

There's this constant theme that keeps coming up in my life for the better part of a year. Namely, this theme of *rest*. I've read books, had conversations with numerous people—seeing the effects of hurry in their life, and I have experienced the negative effects of hurry on my own.

Sabbath is "Shabbat," in Hebrew. Shabbat literally means to *stop*, to *cease*, or to *keep*. In America, Shabbat means "lazy." You don't stop. You don't rest. Resting is for losers and suckers. "You can rest when you die."

Just this morning, I made myself read my Bible. I have a long to-do list today and I really just wanted to get started on it but felt that nudge to begin my day with the Bible. I randomly opened it and the first page I came to was in Isaiah. Here are the verses that I highlighted some time ago that immediately leaped off the page.

If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth.

Isaiah 58:13-14

There's a lot to unpack in those verses. I'm not going to do a commentary on them right now. The fact is, so often, I dishonor God by not honoring the Sabbath. I also short circuit the benefits of honoring the Sabbath like *delight* and *prosperity*. Not prosperity in a financial sense, but more in terms of God's favor and strong support.

Eight months ago I hit a wall mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. I will spare you all the details, but let's just put it this way—my failure to adhere to the rhythm of Sabbath rest for the last 15 years caused me to burn out. I was crispy.

The reality is, I'm still recovering and I might never fully recover. Here's a picture of what burnout may look like.

- Irritability
- Pessimism/Sarcasm
- Self-pity
- Ingratitude/Entitlement
- Damage to relationships
- Emotional constipation
- Joylessness
- Anxiety
- Resentment
- Bitterness
- Sporadic manic behaviors

Okay, I'm going to stop listing things because I can probably double the size of that list. If I can be candid with you, I realized there was a major problem when the most exciting part of my day consisted of drinking a couple glasses of wine each evening before bed while watching Netflix.

Can I be honest with you again? That's still one of the most exciting parts of my day. How does a person *get* there? How do we get to a place like that? I think it looks different for everyone. However, one way you simply get there is by NEVER stopping. As Zach

Eswine, a pastor of a church in the midwest once put it, “We want to do things famously and fast.”

I like to think of the road to burnout as being analogous to this—continuing to drive your car for weeks, months, or years with the check engine light on. Would you do that to your car? Maybe for a week or two. But would you try to drive it for 10, 15, 20, or more years like that? What’s going to happen to that car?

Do you know that you’re not a machine? Do you know that you’re not just a physical body? Do you know that you HAVE to rest? Here are the LIES I’ve listened to over the years—from myself and others, that made me ignore my soul’s check engine light.

“People will think more highly of you if you’re always productive and busy.”

“You need to make this thing happen, despite your plate load or everything that’s going on in life.”

“If you stop now, you’re a failure.”

“You’re too young to be tired. Talk to me when you’re at least in your 40s.”

“There’s too much work to be done. You don’t have *time* to rest.”

I could keep on going with that list as well. Being busy is a badge of honor in our culture. But what are the effects of our hurried lives? What has it produced? Let me give you another long list.

- Heart disease, cancer, anxiety disorders, depression, suicide, etc.
- Less love for one another.
- Mid-life crises
- Divorce and adultery
- Addictions
- Rampant use of pornography
- Decreased production/diminishing returns

- Pessimism

And so on. We've got to be radical about this stuff. Nobody is going to take better care of you than yourself. You have to learn to tell people NO. If you allow people to, they will push you and ask of you until you break, and then you'll be of no use to yourself or anybody.

After my own personal experience, speaking with others over the years, and reading numerous books on the topic, I'm convinced that one of the biggest threats to our faith (for those who are Christians) is constant busyness, rush, and hurry. I don't think it's going to be some moral or epic failure that destroys your faith or marriage. I think it's going to be a failure to eliminate hurry.

The fruit of hurry is probably some type of substance abuse, use of pornography, adultery, or some other moral failure. Those failures will be what you see on the surface, but it was really the failure to eliminate hurry in your life that led to those outward sins.

The Sabbath is for *us*. It was made for us. God has created us to need rest. Jesus himself rested often. He was also the most productive person that ever lived. I'm still learning how to rest, but step one was recognizing my problem. You can't fight an enemy you don't know exists. I just encourage you to examine your life and see how lack of rest may be impacting you in ways you didn't even know.

The World Needs Weak Leaders

September 18, 2022

How's that for a controversial title? Let me show you why it's true, though. If there's one thing the pandemic and the last couple of years have taught me, it's that I don't need to hear about leading from a place of strength. I need to hear about leading from a place of weakness.

The familiar narrative in 21st-century leadership usually goes something like this, maybe with a few variations:

"Hi, I'm *Awesome Bob* and I've learned to master the art of self-discipline. I get up every morning at 4 AM, start my day with some light, 2-hr Bible reading, followed by another hour of prayer, a couple of chapters of Jonathan Edwards, and then a 5-mile run. After my post-run shower, I always prepare 2 egg white omeletes with a side of chard-covered kale and a turmeric and ground iguana smoothie. Currently, I'm taking Mandarin classes in the evenings (just to give myself a new challenge), and I'm completing an online Ph.D. in theology while working on my fifth New York Times Best Seller."

Obviously, I'm using a bit of hyperbole to illustrate a point here but I think we all know what I'm talking about. Tell me, does the above narrative inspire you? Does it change your life? How does that story make you feel? Do you feel empowered by that story?

Is there anything wrong with the person that does all of those things? Is it wrong to be self-disciplined and do things that are good for you spiritually, physically, and mentally? Absolutely not. Don't read this as a slam against any particular influential leader or specific person. I'm not advocating for all of us to be Jeff Lebowskis. The persona I mentioned is more of a principle component of multiple narratives you see in modern leadership.

However, I don't just need to hear about the polished side of a person. I need to hear about the other stuff too. Answers to questions like...

What keeps you up at night?

What sins do you find yourself wrestling with?

What about your insecurities and doubts?

What's not currently going well in your life, marriage, job, relationships, etc.?

In other words, I don't need to just hear about someone's strengths. I need to hear about their weaknesses too! Where do we see this type of well-rounded leadership in scripture?

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have a desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to that law of sin that dwells within me. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Romans 7:18-24, ESV

That was the Apostle Paul, by the way. The guy who wrote most of the New Testament and was one of the biggest trailblazers in the early Church after Jesus' ascension. What else did Paul say about himself?

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

1 Timothy 1:15-16, ESV

He also said things like this:

"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness...For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am STRONG."

2 Corinthians 11:30, 2 Corinthians 12:10, ESV

Paul was a strong leader. He met Jesus on the road to Damascus, established many churches while enduring intense suffering and hardship, rebuked other disciples like Peter, was "caught up to the third heaven, seeing things that man cannot utter," wrote many books in the New Testament, and on and on. Yet, his strength didn't come from how "awesome" he was. It came out of his weakness.

We don't need people that "have it all figured out." We need leaders who are willing to show us their weak areas. Most people across the world have gone through the crucible over the last couple of years. Not just because of the pandemic but even with events going on in their personal lives.

If they want to experience real, lasting change in their lives, they're going to need a lot more than a few self-help books and an inspirational story about how awesome someone is. If you're like me, maybe you've tried to adopt a 4:30 AM schedule for a time. Only to completely fall off the wagon 6 months later. Just because you suck at getting up early, it doesn't mean that you suck at life or that you're a lazy person. If God's made you a morning person, great! Embrace it. If you're more of a night owl, then great, embrace it!

But, if you're a Christian, whether you're super high-speed, self-disciplined, and great at everything or someone who is weak, and struggles all the time, just remember that your righteousness doesn't come from how amazing you are or aren't, it comes from the one who's actually strong. Namely, Jesus.

2025–2026

The Reckoning

After a brain tumor, a failing marriage, and a divorce I never wanted, I finally stopped pretending the formula I'd followed for twenty years had worked.

Life After the Dream

September 17, 2025

What do you do when you follow the formula and you don't get the desired outcome? No matter what anyone says, there is no formula for life. True formulas are reliable. Follow them to the T, and you arrive at the intended outcome. But life is not like that. Life isn't a simple math equation like $y=mx+b$. Life is complex. Life is unpredictable. Life is messy.

I have been chewing on this for at least the last year. And in the last week, one of Charlie Kirk's statements has stuck with me. Namely, he often encouraged young folks along these lines:

Go to Church, get married, have kids, and stop partying into oblivion. Leave a legacy, be courageous.

These are all great pieces of advice, and I agree with them wholeheartedly. You SHOULD do that. However, even if you do all of those things, it won't always lead to the desired outcome. Why? Because this world is broken. You are also broken. Even when you become a Christian, you still have indwelling sin. You're no longer enslaved to sin and are now a slave of Righteousness, but you still have indwelling sin, and this works against both good principles and good intentions.

I became a follower of Jesus at 17 years old (now 20 years ago). I married my high school sweetheart at 18, had my daughter at 20, and my son at 21. I attended Church on Sunday and small group during the week without exception for 2 decades. I worshipped, I prayed, I read books, I attended conferences and retreats. I've read the Bible from cover to cover multiple times. I've listened to thousands of hours of podcasts and sermons. I've given tens of thousands of dollars and so much of my time and energy. I've led small groups, attended small groups, and even moved across the country with a team of 50 other people to help plant a new church in a new city. I've been there, done that, and bought the t-shirt.

20 years later, I'm a divorced, single dad who is completely burned out and has zero zeal for God or the Mission that he laid out for the Church in Matthew 28. I've led hundreds of Bible discussions—attempting to encourage other Christians along in their faith. Although I've done all of these things imperfectly, I've always course-corrected when the trajectory of my life got sidetracked. I didn't sleep around with a bunch of girls in my college years or follow the traditional college narrative. I imperfectly adhered to what Charlie Kirk prescribes to our youth so that things would go well for them.

Again, I'm not trying to come up with a list of “good works” or things that I've done that should “earn” me some sort of praise or blessing or desired outcome.

Truly, I'm just going through an existential crisis of sorts—doing a post-mortem of the last 20 years. However, there is still a part of me that finds it difficult not to feel “cheated” a bit. I did the stuff. I prayed the prayers. I worked really hard. I gave a lot of time, energy, and money. The end result is a tired, cynical, divorced man. I don't come off this way on the surface. It's all internal. It's all ingrained into my nervous system. It's pushed down deep and compartmentalized. No one who meets me views me as a tired, cynical person. I'm actually quite a positive person. But it's often just a suppression of how I actually feel underneath the mask.

I know how to say all of the right things. I know all of the platitudes and can recite them without blemish. I know the verses, the principles, the values, the liturgy, etc. But it's all just a cope. It's all just “positive affirmations.” Most of us are very disconnected from our nervous systems. Cannabis users probably understand this better than most. For example, cannabis-induced anxiety isn't a negative side effect of cannabis use. Cannabis simply reconnects the mind to the nervous system so that you begin to feel the emotions that you subconsciously suppress throughout your day. Those feelings underneath? Those are your actual feelings. Your real feelings. Not the person you are on the surface. It's actually the “real” you.

For 20 years, I kept driving at 80mph with the check engine light illuminated. I ignored it. Buried it. Suppressed it. Maybe it was a bad habit I picked up from my time in the

military? A survival mechanism. But you can only bury those things and ignore the warning lights for so long. Eventually, life comes to collect. One of the worst things about this? Nobody will stop you in your tracks, grab you by the shoulders, look you in the eyes, and say, “Hey, I think if you keep going at this pace, you’re going to turn yourself into a piece of burnt toast.” At the end of the day, you are your own advocate. Nobody’s coming to save you.

How’s your soul doing? We’re a soul in a body, not a body with a soul. Who are you in the deepest recesses of your being? Whoever that person is, that’s the real you. Not the avatar that everyone sees on the surface. As humans, we treasure control. We’re always trying to control things. The illusion of control relaxes our nervous systems. That’s why we treasure it. That’s why dopamine (the neurotransmitter that drives motivation) moves us toward trying to control things. Except we’re not actually relaxing our nervous systems. We’re simply suppressing them. And this works quite effectively—often for years or even decades.

Even people who use drugs and abuse alcohol are ultimately doing it to have some sense of control over their lives. It’s not just the compounds in the drugs that affect our neurotransmitters; it’s the very choice to use the drugs that also calms the nervous system. But this is sneaky. Because there are other habits and behaviors that we can choose to engage in that are much more socially acceptable, and much less “damaging” in one sense than substances. Literally any life activity that gives you the illusion of control and calms your nervous system can be chosen. Even good things.

But again, eventually life comes to collect. Everything has a trade-off. Everything has an opposite and equal reaction. You are not the one exception to the laws of the universe. You will pay the Piper at some point. You’re a human being. You’re finite. You have limitations. But we often ignore this indisputable fact. As one pastor, Zach Eswine, puts it:

| *We want to do large things famously and fast.*

Know your limitations. Acknowledge them. Accept them. Be content with them. This is me preaching to myself as much as anyone else.

Where do I go from here? Things didn't work out the way I had planned. But at the end of the day, I come back to this verse from John 6 where the Apostle Peter is speaking to Jesus:

"After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, 'Do you want to go away as well?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'"

A Bruised Reed He Will Not Break

March 27, 2026

Recently, I heard a teaching by a guest pastor at my local church. He preached on the end of 2 Corinthians 11 and the first part of 2 Corinthians 12, where Paul talks about his hardships and boasting in his weaknesses.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

As an exercise, the guest speaker then began to boast about his weaknesses. About a decade's worth. The message resonated with me deeply. It made me take inventory of the last 10 years of my life. We often boast about the things we're doing well, or point people to how "awesome" we are. But Paul offers a different example. There's something both profound and empowering about boasting in our weaknesses. Another good friend of mine used to say, "If you want to see the power of God, get weak." So, let me get weak for a few minutes here...

Keep in mind, many of these events in my life were overlapping or occurring simultaneously. Any one of them, just on their own, was a lot to bear.

A Bruised Reed He Will Not Break

Richard Sibbes was a Puritan pastor from the late 1500s to the early 1600s. He was known as "The Heavenly Doctor Sibbes." Not just because he had a Doctorate of Divinity, but because of the manner of his preaching. He had a gentleness to him. He had a way of preaching and caring for his people that was marked with mercy and tenderness.

In 1630, he published a book called "The Bruised Reed." It's a short, 128-page book that is essentially an exposition of Isaiah 42:1-3. Yes, he wrote a 128-page book on just 3 verses. And it's absolute riches. Here are the verses (bear with me):

Behold my servant, who I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

Isaiah was talking about Jesus here. Verse 3, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench” is the crux of the entire book. What does it mean?

We are all like “bruised reeds”, or “faintly burning wicks.” Some translations refer to the wick as “smoking flax.” A reed is basically a piece of grass. When you walk through a field of grass and brush against the reeds, they often bend or become “bruised.” As humans, we are like bruised reeds in this world.

Bruised from what? Life.

A faintly smoking wick is like a candle that doesn’t even have a flame, but just has the ever so slightest ember burning. Both the bruised reed and the smoking wick are as close to being broken and quenched as they can possibly be without being completely destroyed. Even when we’re bruised or have only an ember left in us, Jesus is gentle with us. He doesn’t break us or snuff us out. The world might render us useless when we’re at the end of ourselves, but not Jesus. He treats us tenderly and nurses us back to life.

Let me now boast in my weaknesses. Let me boast about the things that “bruised me” or nearly “snuffed me out.”

Church-Planting

In October of 2016, my wife and 2 children moved from our home in Illinois to Gainesville, FL, to help start a church. We came to this city with about 50 other people from the Midwest. The goal was to reach the people of Gainesville and to provide a safe place where they could hear about Jesus and live out their faith. We began in a hotel conference room, where we would meet each Sunday morning.

Anyone who has done church-planting knows that it's a lot of work. It's kind of like trying to do life while you're camping. You're starting a new job, and you're in a place where you don't know anyone or your way around the city. You usually have to set up and tear down every Sunday morning, unless you're fortunate enough to start in a permanent brick-and-mortar location. Everything is a bit "transient" in those beginning years. And on top of all of that, you're trying to meet new people in the community and invite them.

It's a beautiful and edifying work, but certainly hard work. Literal blood, sweat, and tears. We met in a movie theater in year 2. You were greeted with the smell of popcorn and could hear The Avengers playing during the teaching in the adjacent theater. It was a fun adventure! By year 3, we were able to move into a permanent home.

COVID happened in year 4, and it caused quite a bit of turnover by the end of it. I won't beat the dead horse of COVID, though. We all know what it was like, and I think the whole idea of it is a bit fatiguing to talk about at this point. Needless to say, it presented a lot of challenges to a young church that was just getting off the ground.

My Father's Failing Health

In 2018, just 2 years before COVID, my father passed away back in Illinois. My dad was an incredible man. He didn't become a follower of Jesus until late in life, only a few years before his death, actually. But even before he was a Christian, he was just a good man. We were close and very similar. We had the same sense of humor, an interest in college basketball, loved the same music, and even worked a job together for quite a few years. I wasn't able to be there at his bedside when he died. I was only able to get there by the next day. But I feel that he left while we were in a very good place in our relationship. I didn't feel any regrets about him. He knew I loved him. I knew he loved me. And we both knew that we'd be spending eternity together someday.

It was a tough season, and I made the mistake of only taking a week off from work. I had learned how to repress things, put my chin down, and just keep plowing ahead—almost

like I never skipped a beat. It works for a while. And one day, it just comes to a screeching halt, all at once. It comes to collect. You can only evade the payment for so long.

More Deaths

A good friend of mine from my church back in Illinois died young, leaving behind a wife and 3 kids. I believe that was around 2019, but the years often blur together at this point. He loved Jesus dearly, and I know he's with Him in Glory. My heart ached over his death and for his young family's loss. In 2020, my grandmother passed, and a year later, my Grandfather died. They were my last remaining grandparents. You kind of just move on when people pass, but without really ever moving on. You learn to bind up your wounds and live life under the new circumstances. It's like losing an arm and learning how to do life with just one. You're never the same after a death. You move on. But you're never the same.

Stressful Job

In the midst of COVID, the job I was working got very stressful. I had worked my way up to the Leadership Team and was working 60-70 hours per week on a salary. When you're in any kind of leadership, you're usually spending the majority of your time just putting out fires instead of doing anything productive or needle-pushing. We dealt with lawsuits, difficult customers, dishonest employees, striving to hit revenue goals—you name it.

A Failing Marriage

Toward the end of my tenure with the company, my marriage began to get rocky. I allowed my job to take so much out of me that it was affecting things at home. There's more to it than that, but that was my part in the marriage. A distance was slowly growing between us, and it was difficult for me to see it until the distance had already gone too far. I won't go into the details, but we spent 3 more years going through an intense trial without healing or some sort of resolution.

Another Family Member Got Cancer

In the midst of a struggling marriage, my mother-in-law, back in Illinois, was diagnosed with cancer and required chemotherapy. She was also a caretaker for her elderly mother, so she needed a ton of help while she went through 4 months of treatment. Because I owned a small business by this point, where I'm able to work remotely, I stayed with her in Illinois for a month to go with her to her treatments and also care for her mother. It was a challenging time because my wife and I were separated for almost that entire year. Thankfully, my mother-in-law went into remission and has been cancer-free since. Nonetheless, the event felt like another storm within a storm.

Financial stress

Like many of the events I've mentioned, most of them were overlapping. Financial stress began that same year when my wife and I were separated. I was paying the bills, but the margin was razor-thin. I had also invested some money in cryptocurrency, that skyrocketed up to \$340,000, before rapidly crashing down to nearly \$0 almost overnight. Costs continued to go up during and after COVID, and as we all know, have been going up ever since. Even to this day, I still deal with financial challenges.

Church Controversy

As a backdrop to everything else, our church network began to go through some controversy and scrutiny. I don't have to go into the details here, but essentially, we went through an intense trial as a group of churches for about 2 years, until many of the churches disbanded from the group and became completely independent (ours included). Some of them even shut the doors completely. I want to get into the semantics of everything, but just know that it was complicated and difficult for hundreds of different reasons.

Brain Tumor

In 2024, I found out that I had a brain tumor. While the family and I were driving out to the springs on a Saturday, a man rear-ended us on the highway, going at a pretty good clip. None of us was seriously injured aside from a few bruises. I got checked out at the hospital

just to be safe. When they called me back to go over my CT scan, they informed me that I looked good regarding the accident, but that they found an abnormality in my brain. They referred me to UF Health to get an MRI. After meeting with the neurosurgeon, she informed me that I had a benign congenital brain tumor. Formally, this type of tumor is known as an Intracranial Epidermoid Cyst. One percent of all brain tumors. It's usually in the Cerebellopontine Angle (CPA) region of the brain. The tumor often sits on the surfaces between the cerebellum, the pons, and the brain stem. It also sticks to the surfaces of your cranial nerves.

The surgery was successful, but the recovery was painful. Moreover, I felt like I didn't have a ton of support from some friends and even some family during that time. I spent the majority of that journey walking through the valley alone.

Divorce

In the sort of "final phase" here, or the proverbial "nail in the coffin," was divorce. That process began in the middle of 2025 and continued on to this year. A 19-year marriage and a 20-year relationship came to an end. It's not something I wanted and is likely something that I will mourn over for a very long time. I also transitioned out of the church that I helped plant. It was on good terms with the church, but it was necessary so that I could rebuild my life separately from my now ex-wife.

I could fill up an entire book with all of the details and ripple effects that come from divorce.

Starting Over – Rebuilding My Life

I'm in the next season. Not a different phase, a completely new season of life. I've been growing closer to my new church family and learning how to be a single father. Life is completely different now. Many of the relationships I had essentially had to come to an end through osmosis, and I've been building new friendships. If you had told me 10 years ago that I'd be sitting where I am today, typing this, I wouldn't have believed you. I never

envisioned my life to be where it is. How can a person (and why would they want to) envision such things?

I've struggled with a desire for God and hadn't felt near to him until more recently. He's been reviving me again, as he always, faithfully does. I've been weak. I've been stripped down bare. But God has met me at the bottom, in the depths. He didn't let the flame go out completely. In no way am I out of the woods; we're never truly out of the wilderness in this life. The entire Earth itself is the wilderness. But there is hope again. I'm reminded of Lamentations 3: 21-23:

But this I call to mind, and therefore have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

There's also encouragement from Habakkuk:

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

Even if everything is stripped away, as believers, we can rejoice in the LORD.

2026–present

Starting Over

I'm rebuilding as a single father in a new church family, and I'm finding that God hasn't let go of me even though so much else has.

What Does the Bible Actually Say About Hell?

July 20, 2026

I decided to resurrect my blog (pun somewhat intended). I say somewhat intended because I'm actually not trying to be funny. The topic I'm writing on is a sobering one. And a troubling one. But it's been heavy on my heart for the last few days as I've been wrestling with the topic myself. It's been unpleasant, to say the least. But it has been weighing heavily for the last couple of days, in a way that it never has before. To the point where I struggled even going to sleep last night, because I felt such angst for those who are perishing or who have already perished. There's a subject that none of us like to think or talk about. Not even most pastors. And I understand why. It's probably the most uncomfortable thing a person can ponder. Just death itself is a taboo subject. We're so sanitized from death; more so than any other time in human history. Back in the day, death was familiar. People lived in mostly agrarian societies where they slaughtered animals. Even the common cold or a routine infection could easily result in death for the young or the elderly. When family members died, you had their funeral in your living room. Then, you buried them in your backyard in the family cemetery. What's an even touchier subject than death? The second death. Yes, the death of your body is not the final death for someone who isn't saved from God's judgment. There's a second death: the death of one's soul. You're not just a body. You're composed of 3 parts: a spirit, a soul, and a body. There's a bit of a mystery when it comes to the differences between the spirit and the soul, but the Bible suggests they're separate from one another. Your soul is made by God to last for eternity. It never ceases to exist once it's created at conception. Your soul is who you are. Namely, your consciousness, your personality, your heart, your will, your emotions, your desires/passions, etc. It's "you." Your spirit has a soul that lives in a body, and your body is a shell that simply allows you to interact with our 3D + 1 (time) physical dimension. Your soul didn't exist in eternity past like God. Sorry to break it to the new age folks who believe in "old souls" and reincarnation. However, it will exist from now into eternity. And where your soul will spend eternity is the most crucial question a person can ever

contend with. The Bible is clear. We will either spend eternity with God or eternity separated from Him. What does the Bible say about hell? Jesus himself actually talks about hell more times than he does heaven in the New Testament. And that was actually loving for Him to do so. He didn't come to condemn the world, but to save it. Save it from what? His own wrath. He came to save the world from Himself. What is he saving us from, exactly?

Passages on Hell ### Hades (NT: Often Equivalent to Sheol; Temporary Realm of the Dead) Hades appears in contexts of death, gates, and (in one key parable) torment. -

****Matthew 11:23/Luke 10:15:**** Capernaum brought down to Hades (judgment imagery). -

****Matthew 16:18:**** "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against" the church. - ****Luke 16:23–24, 28:**** (most descriptive): The rich man "in Hades, being in torment," lifts eyes, sees Abraham and Lazarus afar; begs for water to cool his tongue "for I am in anguish in this flame"; a great chasm fixed; warns brothers lest they come to "this place of torment." -

****Acts 2:27, 31:**** (quoting Psalm 16): Christ's soul not abandoned to Hades; no decay. -

****Revelation 1:18:**** Christ holds "the keys of Death and Hades." - ****Revelation 6:8:**** Death and Hades follow the pale horse, given authority to kill. - ****Revelation 20:13–14:**** Death and Hades give up the dead for judgment; then "Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire."

Gehenna (Fiery Judgment, Often "Hell") Jesus uses this term (valley of Hinnom imagery) for a place of fire and destruction. - ****Matthew 5:22:**** Liable to "the hell of fire." - ****Matthew 5:29–30/18:9:**** Better to lose a body part than for the whole body to be thrown into hell (Gehenna). -

****Matthew 10:28/Luke 12:5:**** Fear God "who can destroy both soul and body in hell." -

****Matthew 23:15, 33:**** Hypocrites deserving "the sentence of hell"/"how will you escape being sentenced to hell?" - ****Mark 9:43–48:**** "Unquenchable fire" where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (quoting Isaiah 66:24). - ****James 3:6:**** The tongue "set on fire by hell."

Lake of Fire/Eternal Fire/Outer Darkness (Final Destiny) This is the ultimate place of punishment (after the final judgment), into which Death, Hades, the devil, and the wicked are cast. - ****Matthew 13:40–42, 50:**** Fiery furnace with "weeping and gnashing of teeth." - ****Matthew 25:41:**** "Depart from me... into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." - ****Matthew 25:46:**** "Eternal punishment" vs. eternal life. - ****2 Thessalonians 1:9:**** "Punished with everlasting destruction" from the

Lord's presence, with flaming fire. - **Revelation 14:9–11:** Tormented with fire and sulfur; "the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night." - **Revelation 19:20; 20:10:** Beast, false prophet, and devil thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur; "tormented day and night forever and ever." - **Revelation 20:15; 21:8:** Wicked thrown into the lake that "burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." ## What Do These Passages Mean? I'm not a Bible scholar or a theologian, so you'll have to bear with my public-school-educated brain. From what I understand as a casual Bible reader for the last 20 years, I will do my best to break some of these passages down. However, do not take my word for everything, and please study and read the Bible for yourself! ### Sheol Sheol was often referred to as the place of the dead throughout the Old Testament. It would seem that it was separated into two places that had a large, impassable chasm fixed between them (Luke 16:23–24, 28). On one side of Sheol was Hades (where the unrighteous went after death). The other side of Sheol was known as "Abraham's Side or Bosom" and was where the pre-Messiah men and women of faith resided (guys like Moses, David, etc.). Abraham's Bosom was paradise, because in Luke 23:43 Jesus told the one thief on the cross next to Him, "Today, you'll be with me in paradise." Abraham's Bosom was paradise, but separate from Heaven. After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, I believe Abraham's Bosom was emptied, and those Old Testament saints were brought to Heaven, where they currently reside. Similarly, any Christian believers who die today immediately go to be with Jesus in Heaven. However, I believe that Hades still exists and is where the unrighteous currently reside, temporarily, in torment. After the Final Judgment, death and Hades will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Hell) for eternity. One of the clearest passages that talks about Hades is found in Luke 16:24-31. > "And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— for I

have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'" This does not seem to be a parable like many of Jesus' other teachings. It seems to be a real story. The rich man is in Hades, in torment, and Lazarus is in Abraham's Bosom/Abraham's side. Both had died, and these are their temporary resting places. Notice that both are also fully conscious. In Hades, it says that the rich man "lifted up his eyes." This means he could see. He calls out for mercy to Abraham and asks him to send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water to cool his tongue because he's in anguish "in this flame." This means that he has all of his senses. He can see, touch, taste, etc. Moreover, it's evident from the passage that he's conscious of his former life back on Earth. He begs Abraham to send him to his father's house so that he can warn his 5 brothers lest they also end up in this place of torment. I heard recently from a teaching on this that what it also implies is that there's no fellowship in Hades. Even though unbelievers are there with many others, there seems to be isolation. Misery loves company, so if he could actually experience company in torment, wouldn't he have wanted his brothers to join him there? There's a lie that the world likes to tell you. Namely, "Hell is one big party." Nothing could be further from the Truth. There is no party in Hades. Also, since God's presence is absent from Hades, there's no light, no life, and no love. It's known as "the outer darkness," where there's "weeping and gnashing of teeth." The Bible also makes it clear that worms and maggots are present in Hades and that they never die. We know on Earth that maggots die quickly after they have no more flesh to feast on. Therefore, if maggots and worms never die in Hades, that implies that they constantly have flesh to feast on. Although there are souls in Hades, it seems that people have some type of "physical body" as well if they have flesh to burn or for maggots to feast on. And from near-death experiencers (NDEs, more on this later), they claim that Hades feels even more real than our current reality and that senses are heightened even more. Essentially, their flesh is constantly on fire and/or rotting and never fully wastes away since maggots constantly have flesh to feast on. ### Gehenna (Hell) "Gehenna," "Hell," "Lake of Fire,"

and "Outer Darkness" all seem to be used interchangeably in the Bible. This is the final resting place of the unrighteous, including Satan and demons. It's the place where death and Hades are "thrown into" after the Final Judgment. The conditions seem to be vastly similar to Hades. Namely, complete absence of God's Light, Love, and Life. Hell was originally created by God specifically for Satan and demons, and was never meant for humans. Humans are unique because we're the only part of creation made in God's image. God's desire has been for no human to perish or end up in Hell. So much so that the Father sent His only Son on a rescue mission into humanity to save the world from this awful place. If you think about it, there will be complete hopelessness and regret for the dead in Hell. There's no way to escape. You're constantly in anguish/pain. You probably know the Truth about everything and regret having rejected God, with no way to repent. You're hungry, but you can't eat. You're thirsty, but you can't drink. You're tired, but you can't sleep (Revelation 14:11: "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night..."). And after the Final Judgment, everyone's soul is actually reunited with their bodies, so people will be in some type of physical form in Hell. And this torment lasts 24/7, 365 days per year, forever. Even 10,000,000 years after the Final Judgment, they will still be there, in anguish. The Greek word for anguish is *odynáō*, pronounced "oh-doo-NAH-oh," which means "to cause intense pain, to torment, to grieve severely, or to suffer sharp pain." My brain cannot truly fathom or conceptualize this. And when I try to, the angst of the idea is honestly more than I can bear. ## What About Near-Death Experiences (NDEs)? There are stories of doctors/surgeons being converted to Christianity due to witnessing NDEs. There are even peer-reviewed articles on people being revived who experience similar "hellish" and distressing visions or imagery while being revived. These journals include: Memory, Frontiers in Psychology, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Journal of Anomalous Experience and Cognition. Oftentimes, the scientific community chalks these up to natural "misfiring of neurons" or purely natural effects of experiencing near-death trauma. Many of the descriptions of what they hear from NDEs are similar across the board: darkness, caves/pits, fire/flames, grotesque/demonic beings, tormenting figures, foul smells, wailing, hopelessness, and isolation. There have even been unconfirmed reports of doctors

seeing patients come in and out of consciousness screaming for them to "revive them" because it's awful where they are. The patients come out completely traumatized. Not all popularized NDE stories are going to be real or accurate (some people just want attention or money), but you can find many out there that appear to be genuine, and their descriptions of what they saw and felt align with how the Bible describes Hades. ## Would a Loving God Actually Send People to Hell? According to the Bible, it would seem that "many" will spend eternity in Hell, away from God's presence. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus Himself says: > "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Think about Noah's day when God flooded the Earth due to pervasive wickedness on the Earth. God only saved Noah and his family, along with 2 of each species of animals. This means that all the rest of the humans and animals who were alive perished from the flood. There are patterns in the Bible where past historic events also symbolize spiritual realities and future events. Much like in Noah's day, it's likely that only a remnant will be saved. I understand that's a hard reality, but it seems to be the reality that the Bible paints. As some have said before, the question shouldn't be, "Why wouldn't God save everybody?" but instead should be "Why would God save anybody?" Moreover, people who go to Hell essentially send themselves there. God created hell for Satan and demons. It was never meant for humans. However, people have free will, and many willingly reject God: > "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-

seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality." Many people think of themselves as "good people." However, God's standard of "good" is much higher than ours. Even if you've never physically broken the 10 commandments, Jesus says in Matthew 5:27-28: > "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Therefore, it's not just in deed that we sin, but also in our thoughts. And it only takes 1 bad thought over your entire lifetime to be considered unrighteous before God. But if we're honest, we know that our sin is much greater than that. In Romans 3:23, Paul quotes the Old Testament and says: > "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." > > "As it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.'" This is why the Gospel is so important and why it's "Good News." God has made a way for sinners to come to Him and spend eternity with Him in paradise. The Bible also makes it simple. In Romans 10:9-10 it says: > "Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." It just takes a sincere confession of faith. Then, we "go and sin no more" and follow Jesus until He calls us home! ## Warning to Professing Christians What about warnings for professing Christians? There are many verses for us: **1 John 1:5-10** > "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 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 cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." **1 John 2:3-6** > "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if

we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." **1 John 2:9-11** > "Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes." **1 John 3:3-10** > "And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother." **Matthew 7:21-23** > "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" **Philippians 2:12-13** > "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." **James 2:26** > "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." **Matthew 3:8-10** > "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these

stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Many of these verses are sobering for me. If we are living in any kind of unrepentance, it's right that we should have concern. If we truly abide in Him, we don't make a practice of sinning. As Christians, we must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, and somehow, with confidence, draw near to the Throne of Grace (Heb. 4:16). ## So What Now? As Christians, understanding the realities of Hell should move us to share the good news of the Gospel with non-Christians. Jesus is very clear that there's only One Way to Salvation. Namely, Jesus is the ONLY way that a person can be saved. He's the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Having a burning heart for unbelievers is following one of the two greatest commands: "Loving our neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). We MUST share the hope of Jesus with the lost. How unloving of us would it be to have the antidote in our hands, know the realities of Hell, and not share it with those who are perishing? Paul pleading with tears is a wonderful example for us in 2 Corinthians and Romans 9: > "For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." > > "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Look at Paul's heart here. As Christians, let this be our heart for the lost! That we wouldn't just be okay with our ticket being "punched," so to speak, but also ache for our family and friends who have yet to be saved. We can't save people; only God can give the growth, but we can plant and water!

Are We Known by Jesus?

July 23, 2026

In Mario, there's a power-up he can collect called the *Super Star*. When Mario collects the Super Star, he becomes radiant and enters a temporary state of invincibility. Things that would normally harm him, kill him, or present some type of obstacle or frustration for him are generally rendered "harmless" for the brief moments he has that power-up. He's able to effortlessly glide through the level. But the power-up doesn't last for very long. It wears off (quickly). It might last 5-10 seconds (tops), and then he's back to just being regular old Mario again. ## The Fruit We're Called to Bear I've been going to a weekly men's group every Thursday morning at 6 AM throughout the summer. Today, we were talking about love. Not the eros (passion, romantic, sexual love and desire), but the agape (unconditional, selfless, and sacrificial) kind of love from God. It also got me thinking about the other characteristics of God, and how we're called to be like Jesus, the Son of God and second member of the Godhead. The Bible says that God IS love (1 John 4:8, 16), and we also see His other characteristics (Galatians 5:22-23) throughout the Bible as being: * Joyful * Gentle * Patient * Kind * Good * Faithful * Gentle * Self-Controlled God is also merciful, slow to anger, abounding in *steadfast* love, forgiving (Exodus 34:6-7), humble, and a servant (Philippians 2:5-8). If we call ourselves "Christian," these are what we're called to embody. Throughout the day, all of these qualities are being tested in us. How do I respond to someone when they are inconsiderate of me? When someone asks me for last-minute help with something, and it foils my plans for the day, do I murmur internally or grit my teeth because now I won't get to do what I wanted to do that day? When I don't get what I want, do I pitch a fit? ## Flesh vs. Spirit We all bump up against these things constantly. And over the years, I've learned the difference between striving for Godly behavior out of my own willpower and gumption (the flesh), and doing it through the Power of the Spirit. And the Bible talks about this specifically. Paul addresses it with the Galatians (5:16-24): > "16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and

the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Historically, I've loved self-help stuff. David Goggins. Jocko Willink. Marcus Aurelius. I've been injecting that stuff into my veins for years! "Just get in the dungeon." "It's all carrot and no stick." "Discipline = freedom." "Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one." There's a time and a place for all of those things, and I think there's truth in them. But what's our source of living those things out? Is that how we really embody the attributes of God? By just "willing" ourselves into it; striving and straining? There IS an aspect of our faith that does involve our will and striving and straining. Paul talks about this in Philippians 3:12-14: > "12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." However, that's only half of the picture, and if we're not careful, it can open us up to self-righteousness if it stops there. St. Ignatius of Loyola said this: > "Work as if everything depends on you, and trust as if everything depends on God." It's true that we ARE accountable for our piece of the puzzle. But even more important than just being accountable for doing the behavior, we're accountable for the position of our hearts in doing the behavior. We can do good things begrudgingly. We can do good things joylessly. We can murmur and complain inwardly. We can do good things from a place of selfish ambition or out of a host of any other bad motives. And Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 13 that if we do any good works without love (agape love, not eros love), we have nothing and gain nothing. ## The Super Star

Wears Off Back to the Mario power-up analogy. Yes, I was actually going somewhere with that! I've found that when I spend a significant amount of time in God's Presence (seeking and waiting on the Holy Spirit in prayer, worshipping Him, meditating on His Word, etc.), most of the good works start to feel more "effortless." It's like I get that Super Star "pixie dust" after spending time in His Presence, and it empowers me to actually obey the Commands and embody Christ's Love. But it wears off. It wanes. It doesn't usually even carry you over to the next day. Sometimes, it barely carries you past noon! Haha. When I find that I start to get burned out and feel like I'm over-exerting myself, or becoming "weary in well doing" (Galatians 6:9), it's because I'm spending very little time in relationship with Jesus. We easily forget that Christianity isn't mainly about doing the stuff. It's mainly about actually having a relationship with Jesus. Namely, spending time with Him. Talking to Him. Thinking about Him. Being head-over-heels for Him. Being enthralled by Him. Abiding in Him. Think of "abiding" as being like the word "abode." An abode is something that you live in or stay inside of (like a home or a hut). Jesus Himself talks about the difference between just "doing the stuff" and having a relationship with Him (Matthew 7:22-23): > "22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" ## Doing vs. Knowing Him Christianity isn't primarily about the "doing." The doing is definitely part of it, but it's more of a by-product of having a relationship with our Savior. The works merely demonstrate that we actually belong to Him and that He's not just our Savior, but our Lord. It's taken me 20 years of trying to follow Jesus to learn this. I'm still learning it. If we want to be like our Lord, we have to spend time with Him. It's like the saying that "we're an average of our 5 closest relationships." And if you have a spouse, you don't just "know about them." You know them. And they know you. In that passage in Matthew 7, Jesus doesn't say, "You never knew ME." He says, "I never knew YOU." There are people who know Him, but aren't known by Him. I know all about Jocko Willink. But I've never met the guy in person before, and he doesn't even know I exist. So wouldn't it be crazy if I just walked up to him one day out of nowhere and started chatting with him like we're best buds? ## Known By

Him So how do we truly live the Christian life? We don't do it out of our flesh. We do it by the Spirit. And how does the Spirit dwell in us? Only if we know Him and are known by Him. Jesus is Master, Savior, Lord AND *friend.* And He should be our *best friend.* Our first Love. Our biggest Love.

God Still Speaks to Us

July 25, 2026

At the end of May, I was down in Costa Rica for a health retreat. About 6 years ago, I started being more intentional about my health. It slowly and subtly became a part of my identity. I never do anything casually. I'm an all-or-nothing type of person. "Moderation" is not a word in my vocabulary. Feeling spiritually drained and burned out, my thoughts and affections that were normally directed toward Jesus began to gravitate towards my physical health. We will always replace our affections and desires for God with something else. They have to go somewhere. That's not really the point of this story, though. I may talk more about it some other time. ## Costa Rica At this health retreat, there was a lot going on spiritually. On both sides of the aisle. Something I've noticed over the last few years is that a lot of New Age ideologies have crept into the health and wellness space. Namely, yoga, palm reading, astrology, crystals, breathing techniques, the collective unconscious, etc. At this event, there was a decent amount of all of that going on. Even though I was fairly burned out spiritually during that retreat, I did not participate in those practices. They weren't the focal point of the retreat, but were occurring more in the margins. I always knew enough scripture and had just enough spiritual discernment to know these things were probably spiritual garbage. However, while at this retreat, while all of these things were going on around me, I started to question if I was being a little "uptight" about my views on these practices. Not when it comes to the more overtly spiritual stuff like tarot, astrology, crystals, etc., but when it comes to yoga, certain types of breathwork, and the collective consciousness. Shelf that in your mind for a bit, because I'm going to come back to this in a minute. I believe it was on day 3 of the event that a Christian (Lore), who was also in attendance, approached me because she said she felt like she had some words from God for me. As you can imagine, my interest was immediately piqued. I had vaguely remembered seeing her at the retreat last year with her brother and her son, but we didn't really know each other because we mostly just saw each other in passing last year. I think it was the next day before we could meet up to talk, and we sat

down over lunch at the resort where the retreat was hosted. Lore shared a bit about her family. She and her husband (Fernando) live in Guatemala City and have two beautiful children. She told me her story/testimony about everything that God has done in her life and their life as a family. It was very encouraging. Then, she told me that she felt God had put 3 things on her heart to share with me. And these are not word-for-word, but are the gist of what she said. ### The First One *I feel like God wants you to know that you're not being spiritually uptight or overly cautious about yoga and collective consciousness.*

Now, what's interesting about this first one is that I never told anyone at the retreat about my wrestling over the idea of whether or not yoga and the idea of collective consciousness are spiritually harmful. I had only had this conversation with myself in my mind while there. Only God could've known this internal dialogue (and He does indeed know all of our thoughts, btw)! **Psalm 139:2** > "You discern my **thoughts** from afar." **Psalm 139:23–24** > "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my **thoughts**! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" **1 Chronicles 28:9** > "And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and **thought**." **Hebrews 4:12** > "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the **thoughts** and intentions of the heart." **Psalm 94:11** > "The Lord knows the **thoughts** of man, that they are but a breath." In the Church, this spiritual gift, where a person is able to disclose your private thoughts via the Holy Spirit, is colloquially known as giving "a word of knowledge." This was not foreign to me. I've had this happen many times over the years. However, it WAS the first time someone had given me a word of knowledge in quite a few years. It's just like Jesus did with the woman at the well: **John 4:16** > "Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come here.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.'" So, as you can imagine, Lore immediately had my attention for what she would be sharing with me next. ### The

Second One *God sees that you have a heart for Him and His Mission in the world.* He wants you to come back into that endeavor with Him. At this point, I was fighting back tears. If you know me very well, you know that I hate crying in front of people (I'm working on it...lol). I immediately felt God's Presence rush over me as soon as she ended her sentence. She did not know that I indeed do have a heart for God's Mission in the world. For the handful of you who actually read this blog, you know that I moved to Florida about 10 years ago to help plant a church. I've been a "goer," not just a "sender" for quite a number of years now. And even despite the spiritual valley I had been in for the last however many years, I still had a desire to move to Central America to be used by God in some way. If I'm being honest, what started as a noble desire 6-7 years ago gradually turned into a selfish one. This retreat was my fifth time in Costa Rica. I've been all over that country at this point. I've had the privilege and blessing of God to get to travel to quite a few places in the world. Costa Rica was arguably the most beautiful country I've visited. I've been to Puerto Viejo (on the southeast coast), La Fortuna (where the famous Arenal volcano is located), Quepos, Dominical, Jaco, Uvita, etc. My plan has been to move there within the next few years. But not really with a specific purpose or to do God's work there. It started with that desire in the beginning, but then it evolved into looking at Costa Rica as a place of escape and to cope with my sadness, cynicism, and pain. In Costa Rica, they have a greeting or saying, "Pura Vida." It means "pure life." This is what I wanted. That's the culture there. It really is a "Pure Life." But apart from Jesus, there is no pure life. Truly pure life only comes from Him. ### The Third One *I'm not sure why exactly, but I feel like God wants me to invite you to come to our home in Guatemala City, where we can host you for a few days.* At this point, I'm like, "Sign me up!" We talked a little bit more about our families, exchanged contact info, wrapped up, and the next day was the last day of the retreat. Whenever I feel like God is speaking to me about something, I try not to waste much time and seek to act on whatever it is as quickly as possible. I never want the "unction" to pass. Because if you let it air out too long, sometimes the sense of urgency around it wanes. So I got back home to Florida and started planning to get to Guatemala sometime within the next 4-5 weeks at most. But in that waiting, God was doing a TON in me. His Presence during that conversation with Lore in Costa Rica didn't

stop after I got back to Florida. It actually began to build more and more. As soon as I got back, I confessed some unrepentant sin I had been holding onto and just completely dove into spending crazy amounts of time with Him in prayer, Bible reading, community with other believers, worship, etc. It felt like a 10,000-pound weight had lifted off of me. Years' worth of cynicism, resentment, unforgiveness, or anger no longer remained in me. I felt zeal. I felt a renewal in the joy of my salvation. I felt more peace and contentment than I have for as long as I can remember. ## Guatemala So, Fourth of July weekend, I hop on a plane and fly to Guatemala City. I spent about 4 full days there with my new friends, Fernando and Lore. Fernando and I hit it off immediately. It felt like we'd known each other for years. It's hard to explain. He's a business owner like me, a father, and someone who is passionate about Jesus. Those three similarities gave us hours' worth of conversational ammo. They showed me around their city and took me to Lake Atitlán, which is a mile-high massive body of water that has filled a volcanic crater. It has several Mayan towns around its shoreline, and residents and tourists travel back and forth between towns via boats or ferries. It's about a 3-4 hour drive from Guatemala City, depending on traffic, so I was thankful that we were able to take their helicopter there. It was only about a 25-30 minute helicopter flight. We landed in the village of Panajachel on the north side of the lake and had some delicious lunch. The flight was special to me because I was able to get a bird's-eye view of Guatemala. We flew over numerous small towns and mountains on our way out to the lake. I could feel myself having a heart for the people of Guatemala. The country is beautiful. I honestly feel like it's even prettier than Costa Rica. I've also been to Hawaii, and Guatemala gives it a run for its money. The weather in Guatemala City and Lake Atitlán is superb due to their high altitude, despite their tropical location. Even in early July, temperatures were in the high-70s with low humidity. There are tons of volcanoes, coffee farms, and agricultural areas. However, there's also a dark side to Guatemala.

Lake Atitlán has a lot of dark, spiritual influences. Everything from witchcraft and new age hippie stuff to drugs, prostitution, and Mayan deity worship, like the worship of Maximón, who's depicted as a wood effigy that accepts cigarettes and alcohol as offerings.

In Guatemala City, you have neighborhoods that are unsafe to visit. Due to the presence of gangs like MS-13 and narco traffickers, you risk kidnapping, extortion, or even being killed. Moreover, Guatemala is a third-world country. There's a huge gap between the upper class and the lower class. Many people in Guatemala live in extreme poverty. The physical problems in Guatemala are mostly manifestations of spiritual ones. I spent my days with Fernando and Lore praying, worshipping, fellowshiping, and attending their church together. I was reminded of how poor my Spanish is and how badly I need to start practicing again! I got some great prayer myself while I was there, and they were so hospitable to me. I also got to meet some members of their extended family who treated me like family. It was incredible that they basically invited a complete stranger into their home and just let me live life with them for a few days. I can't wait to return to visit them again! ## The Return After I returned from Guatemala, I started to "debrief" myself, so to speak. Asking questions like: "What was God doing in bringing me on that trip?" "Could God be calling me to be a missionary in Guatemala?" "What are my biggest takeaways from my time there?" It's been about 3 weeks since I returned from the trip. I've essentially boiled everything down to about 3 takeaways (why is everything in 3's? haha). ### Takeaway #1: God was spoiling me. Lore and Fernando were gracious to host me in their wonderful home, feed me tons of delicious meals, chauffeur me around everywhere, pray for me, and encourage me. It felt like a life-giving reprieve from the wilderness my life has felt like for a while now. God is just good like that. Sometimes, he just wants to love on us as His children. ### Takeaway #2: I've noticed that whenever I travel outside of the United States, there's a palpable difference in the spiritual climate. We're very intellectual in the West, and we like to think in terms of scientific measurement and explanation for everything. We keep everything very physical. I have a master's degree in climate and atmospheric science, so I'm about as scientific as they come. However, we are NOT just physical bodies in a physical dimension. We have a body, a soul, and a spirit. And our God is a spiritual God. There is natural, and then there is supernatural. In the U.S., this is controversial. Outside of the U.S., it's not controversial at all (with the exception of Western Europe). You won't find many atheists in Latin America, Asia, or Africa. People are all too familiar with the spiritual, on both sides of the aisle. The Church in the U.S. is

generally mature when it comes to Truth, scripture, and theology. This is a wonderful thing, of course! We're often mature in Truth, but immature in Spirit. And I would say in both uppercase Spirit and the reality of lowercase spirit. There are always exceptions like charismatic circles and the Pentecostal movement. Outside of the U.S., I find that the inverse is true. Namely, people are more mature in Spirit/spirit but more immature in Truth. Ideally, as Christians, we're mature in both. **John 4:23-24** > "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." Scripture is crucial. By reading Scripture and teaching Scripture, you cultivate an environment or lay a solid foundation for the Spirit of God to move and operate. There are two ditches we can fall into as Christians: 1. All Spirit and no Truth 2. All Truth and no Spirit Although being out of balance isn't an issue of Salvation, we should strive as Christians to cultivate maturity in both Spirit and Truth. I've been reading my Bible and listening to good Bible teaching for the last 20 years. I'm not a theologian or a Bible expert, but I have a fairly solid foundation of Biblical truth and theology in my life. I'd say I'm "mature" in Truth. However, something I've realized in my recent travels to Latin America is that I'm a bit immature in Spirit. Which is funny, because my theology on the Holy Spirit and the spiritual gifts would be considered by many to be "charismatic." However, I don't consider myself to be charismatic. I say all of this to say that I believe one thing God was teaching me during my time in Guatemala is to have higher expectations and more Faith for the Holy Spirit's movement in the world. That is an area God is seeking to mature me so that I'm better-equipped to help fulfill His Mission in the world. ### Takeaway #3: God seemed to redirect my sights away from Costa Rica and placed my attention toward Guatemala. I'm not certain if I will end up in Guatemala long-term, but it's possible that He has Work for me there. I'm definitely open to it and praying about it. Guatemala was never even on my radar until recently, as I was thinking about missionary work in Central America. It's not one of the first countries I would've chosen. Therefore, I'm not really worried about it just being "my idea," not His. However, all spiritually discerned things must be tested through Scripture, prayer, and Godly counsel. God will lead me in the Way to go. **John 10:27** > "My sheep hear my

voice, and I know them, and they follow me." So I don't know exactly what's next, but what I do know is that God is speaking to me and is faithful to me, even when I am faithless. There's nothing I would rather spend my life doing than being in service for Jesus and His Kingdom. If I get another 38 years, they will be spent on being spent for Him!

The Narrow Gate Runs Through the Grocery Line

July 28, 2026

I've been a professing Christian for 20 years, and I feel like I'm just now learning what it looks like to live out the two greatest commands. I feel like much of my life has been centered around religion. Namely, "doing stuff." It's easy to get caught up in just doing a bunch of liturgy and rituals. Why is that? I think one reason is that those things are way easier than loving people through sacrificial service. ## The Greatest Commands

****Matthew 22:36-40**** > "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Loving people often involves dying to self. This can involve numerous selfless decisions, like setting aside your own comforts and preferences, throwing your daily schedule out the window, and sacrificing your time, energy, and money. ****Let's face it, if I'm being honest, I'd much rather lead a Bible discussion for an hour or sing during worship at church than spend time mowing an old widow's lawn, sit in the hospital for hours with someone, or watch a couple's kids for a few hours so that they can have a much-needed date night.**** ****What I'm not saying:**** That you shouldn't lead or attend Bible discussions or spend time in worship at church with God's people or that such activities aren't important. ****What I am saying:**** Following Jesus involves much more than just going to Bible discussions and singing during worship sets at church. ## What Is True Religion? ****James 1:27**** > "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." God has always desired more than just our religious duties. He wants our hearts. He wants a relationship with us. He wants us to love other people and treat them the way we wish to be treated (the Golden Rule). In the context of the Greatest Commandment and the Golden Rule during Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he mentions entering through the narrow gate: ****Matthew 7:12-14**** > "So whatever you wish that

others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Part of entering through the narrow gate involves living out the two greatest commands, one of which is loving our neighbors as ourselves. And it's no coincidence that Jesus says this just a few verses later: ****Matthew 7:21-23**** > "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" Again, doing religious acts is not the end-all be-all of Christianity. We can do all of those things (go to church, worship, pray, prophesy, cast out demons, heal people, etc.) and still not be known by Jesus or fulfill what he cares about most. This is why the gate is so narrow, and few find it. As Christians, I think this is so important for us to understand. We actually make it more complicated than it needs to be. What Jesus has been showing me: Doing his will looks like this: ****Acknowledging the marginalized, the weak, the helpless, and those who society has passed over.**** ****Matthew 25:31-46**** > "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' > > "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart

from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." When we pass the homeless on the street, do we look them in the eyes, acknowledge them, and treat them with dignity and compassion as human beings who are created in the image of God? Do we enter into the sufferings of widows and the fatherless? Do we empathize with them and seek to comfort them and care for them? This is an area that I want to grow in! I'm preaching to myself and holding myself accountable here as well. Lord, give me a heart for the brokenhearted, the poor in spirit, the marginalized, and the forgotten! Beyond just caring for the widows and the fatherless, how do we talk to our servers when we go out to eat after church, where we just got done praising God and listening to his Bible being preached? When the gas station clerk is ringing us up, and we notice through their body language that they look like they're having a rough day, do we say something encouraging to them or say something funny to make them smile and brighten their day? I promise you, these are the interactions and the things Jesus cares about most. Let's not miss this. Christianity is much simpler than we make it out to be. Again, I'm not saying the other stuff isn't important. What I am saying is if we do all of the other stuff but fail to love ALL people and treat them with kindness, compassion, dignity, and respect, we will miss it altogether. Like the Apostle Paul said about love: **1 Corinthians 13:1-12** > "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love

bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

Nothing Good Falls From Nowhere

July 30, 2026

Everything good comes from God. As we awaken each morning, the light our eyes see when we open them comes from God. He made the sun and sustains the sun. Even in the night, we have moonlight and starlight. Our breathing? From God. Our strength to move our bodies? From God. That first sip of hot fresh coffee in the morning? From God. A hot shower? From Him. Sexual intimacy with a spouse? From Him. And laughter...and Hugs...and Hope...and Peace...and Love; all are from Him. Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of Lights (James 1:17). What are the things we experience from Him and through Him on this Earth? ## Good Things that Come From God

- **Love** (1 John 4)
- **Life** (Acts 17)
- **Light** (1 John 1)
- **Rest** (Matthew 11)
- **Peace** (Philippians 4)
- **Comfort** (2 Corinthians 1)
- **Hope** (Romans 15)
- **Beauty** (Ecclesiastes 3)
- **Order** (1 Corinthians 14)
- **Satiety** (Psalm 145)
- **Satisfaction** (Psalm 90)
- **Belief** (Ephesians 2)
- **Kindness** (Titus 3)
- **Strength** (Philippians 4)
- **Gentleness** (Galatians 5)
- **Restraint** (Galatians 5)
- **Laughter** (Genesis 21)
- **Joy** (Nehemiah 8)

- **Relief** (2 Thessalonians 1)
- **Justice** (Isaiah 30)
- **Courage** (Joshua 1)
- **Affection** (Philippians 1)
- **Wisdom** (Proverbs 2)
- **Creativity** (Exodus 31)

God is **infinite** in all of those attributes. And that list isn't even exhaustive. I'm sure there are many more. The full amount of just one of those attributes is uncontainable in all of creation, let alone within us. We cannot fully contain or comprehend the sheer magnitude of each of these attributes in God. Have you ever felt God's love, kindness, peace, life, etc. and tried to fully "receive" and store them up in your heart? It's impossible. He's incomprehensible. When I've tried to store Him up in my heart, it feels like it's going to burst/explode and I struggle to find human words that can describe, express, or do justice to the fullness of each of these attributes that God possesses. It's not even that He just possesses them, He **is** them. In his Confessions, written during the fourth century A.D., Augustine wrestles with this impossible task, trying to fully express, or "contain," God, and he says it better than I ever could: > "For the things which you fill by containing them do not sustain and support you (God) as a water-vessel supports the liquid which fills it. Even if they were broken to pieces, you would not flow out of them and away. And when you pour yourself over us, you are not drawn down to us but draw us up to yourself: you are not scattered away, but you gather us together...You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present among us, the most beautiful and yet the most strong, ever enduring and yet we cannot comprehend you...Yet woe betide those who are silent about you! For even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you." >

> **Saint Augustine of Hippo, Confessions** ## Growing In Gratitude Towards God One of the things that makes Hell "Hell" is God's absence. He removes all of His attributes from that place. We just think that these good things "happen" or are "present" here on Earth, but they're not just present. They're here because He's put them here and sustains them here. And even with all of the evil that is in the world, God still restrains much of it.

That's why we have governments and laws and police and emergency services people, and non-profit organizations, and hospitals, and programs. It's His common grace that He bestows on both the just and the unjust here on Earth. When you start to attribute every single "good" or "comfort" in your life to God; even the small things we often take for granted, you begin feeling tremendous gratitude toward God. You've probably heard it said: "Earth is as close to Heaven as a non-Christian will get, and as close to Hell as a Christian will ever get." We experience tastes of both Heaven and Hell in this world, but all the good in this world is from Him. All of it. And it's His delight to give good gifts to His children (Matt. 7:11).

The Most Scandalous Defamation in History

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In the Parable of the Ten Talents, the third servant, who kept the one talent and didn't multiply it, said this to Jesus after He was called to account for his use of the talent: > "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours." > > Matthew 25:24b-25 You're probably familiar with the story, so you know that he was declared to be a "wicked servant" and was cast into the outer darkness. ## The Wicked Servant's Lie From what the servant said about Jesus ("I knew you to be a hard man"), it's evident that he didn't actually know Jesus. Because what he said about Him couldn't have been further from the Truth. Jesus is misrepresented in our world, more often than not. And Satan has done a masterful job of defaming Him throughout all of human history. He was so good at misrepresenting who God is that he convinced a third of the angels and Adam and Eve to question God's goodness and rebel against Him. There isn't a more scandalous example of defamation in all of history. And Satan works 24/7, defaming God, lying about who He is, and trying to get all of us to believe the lie. ## Imagine That Times 1,000 Think of the most standup person you know. Let's just say Tim Tebow, as a human example. Because, come on, how could anyone hate a guy like Tim Tebow? Imagine you know nothing about him, but there's someone else of influence who starts a vicious smear campaign to turn everyone against him. How unjust would that be? Now imagine that times 1,000. ## The God We Actually Serve God has no hesitation in His love and affection. He's perfect, kind, patient, gracious, quick to forgive, slow to anger, humble, merciful, gentle, orderly, just, holy, blameless, creative, and so much more. How do most people see Him, though? Unless you know Him, you'd probably use a lot of other not-so-positive words to describe Him. This is such an injustice. Even as a believer, I've struggled with seeing Him as angry, impatient, harsh, or too demanding at times in my life. But the longer I've spent time with Him and gotten to know Him, I've realized that He's even more wonderful than I could ever imagine. ## Even the Prophets

Knew Better The prophet Jonah, despite being a pretty big punk, at least was familiar with who God is. It's the main reason he didn't want to go to Nineveh and preach repentance to the Ninevites: > "And he [Jonah] prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.'" > > Jonah 4:2 And Micah said: > "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love." > > Micah 7:18-19 In some translations, it says, "he delights in mercy." This is the God we serve. Don't buy the lie that He is a "hard man" or is too demanding. He's quick to forgive and abounding in steadfast love. He's always waiting for us with open arms.