

Not What I Expected

Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else? Matthew 11:3

John the Baptist confronted sin and spoke truth, commanding everyone to repent, and preparing people's hearts for the future Messiah. When he recognized Jesus as that Messiah, John was the first to proclaim, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" But soon he was thrown into prison, a prison from which there would be no escape.

Month after month went by, and John's dreams of the coming kingdom of God became harder to imagine. So he sent his disciples to Jesus with the question—a question born of suffering: "*Are You the Expected One?*"

The strongest of believers, when thrust into the darkness of death and suffering, can have doubts about what they believe. And how did Jesus respond? He sends no strong words of reproof, no condemnation. Instead, He instructs John's disciples, "Tell John what you hear and see . . ." and shares Scripture verses that John would have known well, truth that John could hold onto amidst the bleakness and despair of his circumstances. And then Jesus has this to say about His doubting friend: "*Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist . . .*" John has publicly admitted his doubts about Jesus, yet Jesus gives John honor at the very moment of his greatest weakness in faith. And with John in prison, seemingly of no use anymore, Jesus uses his life and example to point people to God's eternal kingdom.

I, too, have questions born of and borne by suffering and loss. Yet in that suffering, Jesus urges me to remember what I have seen and heard. He reminds me of verses that say who He is and what He promises. And God is willing to use me in my weakest moments for His glory and for His kingdom—not *when* I escape this prison of grief, but *right now*, as I stumble through the darkness and cry for understanding and help.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Judges 13:1-14:20
John 1:29-51
Psalm 102:1-28
Proverbs 14:15-16

Sunday, May 3

Carelessness

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Leviticus 10:1-2 NIV

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire because they disrespected God, probably by being drunk (Leviticus 10:9) when performing their priestly duties. Some other examples include: King Uzziah's burning of incense (2 Chronicles 26:20), Uzzah touching the ark (2 Samuel 6:7), Ananias and Sapphira lying about holding money back (Acts 5:5,10), and weak or sick Corinthian believers (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). Sadly, we too can become careless in our service to God.

But God is supremely concerned with our holiness. Careless disobedience to His Word or to the Spirit's leading is never excused. Instead we are called to be "more discerning with regard to ourselves [so that] we would not come under such judgment" (1 Corinthians 11:31 NIV). The longer we are in any earthly role, particularly ministry, the more apt we are to complacency. In our fallen nature even our service to God and His church can become mundane and robotic.

May that never happen to us! May we judge ourselves rightly so that we are not disciplined by God! May we always joyfully burn with a passion for holy service to the King of all Creation! May we never become careless in our worship!

Let us resolve to be holy in every aspect of our lives, especially our ministry and religious observations. Such things as teaching, praying, communion, and small groups must be done carefully at all times rather than carelessly. Even our home and "secular" work life must be observed as holy and dedicated to the Lord. Anything short of this is not worthy of our Lord.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Judges 17:1-18:31
John 3:1-21
Psalm 104:1-24
Proverbs 14:20-21

Healing and the Cross

. . . and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. 1 Peter 2:24

Jesus bore the penalty of our sins in His body—we do not pay for our own sin. He did so in order that we could die to sin and live to God. We are no longer alive to the domain and dominion of sin. In other words, sin is no longer the tyrant-master over us. We are no longer under sin's rule. We are now alive to God, and we are to live under His rule.

It is by His wounds that we are healed. By them we have been transferred from the domain of sin to the domain of God. We now live under the true Lord of the creation and no longer under the false one, the tyrant and slave driver.

And in the age to come, we look forward to complete and total healing. There will be physical healing: "and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Revelation 21:4). There will be emotional healing: "He Himself will wipe away every tear" (Revelation 21:4). There will be relational healing: "He will dwell with them and they will be His people" (Revelation 21:3) There will be healing of the cosmos: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth" and "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:1, 5).

What a Savior! Even so, come Lord Jesus!!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Judges 15:1-16:31
John 2:1-25
Psalm 103:1-22
Proverbs 14:17-19

Monday, May 4

Elena and Frincu

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Hebrews 12:1 ESV

My daughter Elena plunked herself down next to the elderly Pastor Frincu on Sunday morning at the church we were visiting. While David gave a sermon, she nestled next to Pastor Frincu, softly stroking his 80-year-old hand in her eight-year-old one. Fratele (Romanian for "Brother") Frincu has lived his old age like we hope to one day: strong, cheerful, lucid, and full of love for others.

Elena clings to Frincu because she knows he likes her. They have a special connection ever since she was a two-year-old and we were on a camp hike. Frincu was leading us over hills and valleys, telling stories of Christians under communism, and he noticed me carrying a sleeping Elena. Being a gentleman, he insisted on carrying her for me. I still have a vivid image of him carrying my little girl and hiking along, 74 years old, very enchanted by her.

Elena loves this grandfather today because she knows he loves her, and she senses that he is good. What she doesn't realize is that he is one of the last of his generation who suffered much in Romania under Communism for their faith. She doesn't know he was beaten so badly by his own mother for becoming a Christian that she dislocated his leg. Elena doesn't realize that he was God's tool to eventually lead his whole village to the Lord. She doesn't know he repeatedly risked his life by distributing Bibles under Communism, signing each one with his own name, so that if someone were caught, he could say, "It's not mine. I'm just borrowing it from Fratele Frincu." Such is Fratele Frincu's love. May you count him among your cloud of witnesses and keep running the race of faith!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Judges 19:1-20:48
John 3:22-4:3
Psalm 104:24-35
Proverbs 14:22-23

Elena and Frincu – 2

Even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. Isaiah 46:4 ESV

Our eight-year-old daughter, Elena, has no idea of the depth of love Fratele Frincu, the 80-year-old Romanian pastor who carried her for me on a hike when she was two, has for His Lord or the Lord's Bride, the Church. Countless people have been blessed through his pastoring, his hospitality, his devotion to Christ. We used to live in the same town and see him peddling by on his bike in suit and tie to do pastoral visits. He was going to "the old people," the bed-ridden (many younger than he!).

Elena doesn't know what a treasure this man is, and how he commands the respect and love of many. She just knows he's her friend. She cuts through his generation's polite restraint by plopping down during the service (on the men's side of the church!) and snuggling up to him. And he loves it.

We are a little like this in our love for God. We have barely begun to know or understand Him, but we know He loves us. We know He carried us long ago from death into life on the cross, and this gives us courage to approach the Ancient of Days without fear and enjoy His company.

We don't know how many more days Fratele Frincu has to walk this earth. I count each meet-up a special gift. He ministers as a fill-in grandpa for my little girl whose own grandparents are across the ocean. And he inspires me to live faithfully, like he has lived, and to realize that—with Christ—being 80 years old won't be that bad.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Judges 21:1-Ruth 1:22
 John 4:4-42
 Psalm 105:1-15
 Proverbs 14:25

Shelter in Place

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. Psalm 91:1 NIV

The other day I had a strange memory pop into my mind. Our kids were young, and we were all home on a Saturday when we heard lots of police car sirens outside and helicopters overhead. I was about to go outside to see what was going on when a neighbor called and told us to lock our doors, turn off our lights and turn on the TV news. I locked the front and back doors and gathered all the family upstairs. The news was announcing a bank robber was on foot after holding up a bank near our neighborhood. The TV helicopter was showing our street as the police were going house to house. I looked out our window and saw police looking in the tall bushes of the neighbor's house across the street. I told Kelly and the kids to get low, and if someone comes to the door don't make a move.

We felt scared and vulnerable and helpless, and so I suggested we pray together for God to give us shelter and protection. In Psalm 119:114 David prays, "You are my shelter and my shield; I put my hope in Your word" (CSB). As much as I needed to call out to God, my children needed to see that's what we do as Christ followers.

In many ways I feel the same right now. The news is telling me just how close the enemy virus is to my home. We are being told to shelter in place as a family and what is being done to arrest the bad guy named Covid. We feel scared and vulnerable—and sometimes even helpless. May it also be a time we gather to pray: "Lord, come be our shelter and our shield. We put our hope in You." Don't forget—the Lord is closer than you think!

Hang in there, friends—we are in this together.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 1:1-2:31
 John 5:1-23
 Psalm 105:37-45
 Proverbs 14:28-29

The Weakest Great Commission?

So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." John 20:21

Each of the four gospels contains an instance of Jesus giving the Great Commission. Most people think of Matthew 28 as being the most classic. I used to think of John 20:21 as being "a bit of a stretch" as an instance of the Great Commission. No longer.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus repeatedly says that He has been sent by the Father. In fact, I counted no less than 40 times that He made that claim! Did you notice that the verse above says "Jesus said to them **again**"? When had He previously said that? In the high priestly prayer of John 17:18 is one example: "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world."

The really scary word in this verse is the little word "as." It simply means "in the same way." You and I have been sent (commissioned) to carry out the same mission of seeking and saving that Jesus fulfilled. Of course, only He could die for the sins of the world. But He wants to work through us to seek the lost and to bring His salvation to the entire world. What a commission and purpose in life! And what a privilege!

In fact, you could make a case that this is the most complete version of the Great Commission, since we are not only given a few specific commands to follow, but are sent **as** He was sent.

The One whom the Father sent into the world has now sent us. What a great commission!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Ruth 2:1-4:22
 John 4:43-54
 Psalm 105:16-36
 Proverbs 14:26-27

Time Capsule

Remember the wonders he has done. 1 Chronicles 16:12

The other day we came across a box in the basement that brought back all kinds of memories of God's faithfulness. In the box were cards and photos and little stuffed animals given to our daughter Jill when she had open-heart surgery at three years old—almost 30 years ago. We saved them because we knew that whenever we opened that box we would remember how God was so good to save our daughter's life. It's the same reason some of us today have a stronger desire to journal during this shelter-at-home pandemic: so we can look back and remember how God helped us and delivered us. My grandson, Andy, is a one-year-old and he will not remember the Spring of 2020, but he'll have my journal entries to recall how we trusted in God in a very scary time.

In Joshua 3 and 4 we read of when the Israelites had no way to cross the strong currents of the Jordan River. Joshua prayed for a miracle; the Jordan River opened up just like the Red Sea had done for Moses. Joshua had each of the 12 tribes grab one large stone from the riverbed and carry it out to make a memorial monument. Why? Joshua said that in the future when our kids ask us what this monument of rocks is all about, we can remind them of God's faithfulness and love to us when we needed it so desperately.

Here's an idea. As a family, consider making a time capsule during this pandemic. Each of you write a letter about how you are feeling right now. What verses in the Bible are giving you hope? What activities, games, movies, and apps are drawing your family together? Turn a shoebox into a time capsule and start adding things to it for the next few months. Then seal it up and label it. Down the road, you may be surprised to see how faithful God was in the spring of 2020.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 2:22-4:22
 John 5:24-47
 Psalm 106:1-12
 Proverbs 14:30-31

You Never Know...

I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. 1 Corinthians 3:6 NLT

Years ago my wife Lisa was concerned about one of her teenage nieces. She was struggling spiritually, so Lisa had an idea. She called her up and left a short message. All she said was she was here for her niece if she needed to talk and reminded her that God loves her. For ten years there was no response from her niece.

Silence.

Ten years.

Finally, on Lisa's birthday she received this note:

Hi Auntie Lisa! I hope you had a wonderful birthday, and I thought I'd take advantage of your special day to share with you something that I don't think I have before. When I was at my lowest point in high school, I believe it was junior year, I was so far from the Lord in every way and was feeling so lost and alone. I was in church one Sunday and pleaded with God to still be alongside me and to show me that everything would be okay. Less than an hour later we got home and on our answering machine was a message from you to me. You said that you felt the Lord telling you to call and check in and to let me know that he loves me and that you are here if I need to talk. Me, being 16 years old and not at a good place, never called. That phone call has stayed with me every day since. Thank you for always being such an amazing example of what a woman after God's own heart looks like. I love you Auntie! Happy birthday!

Sometimes when we reach out to others, we don't see the results we hope for. If this is you, stay encouraged.

You just never know what God's doing.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 5:1-7:17
 John 6:1-21
 Psalm 106:13-31
 Proverbs 14:32-33

Monday, May 11

Letter to a Grandson

He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.

Proverbs 18:22

House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord.

Proverbs 19:14

I've read, thought about, and shared that first verse above quite a bit during Becky's and my 47 years of marriage; the second one has meant a lot to me too.

I did a little research on "prudent." It means "careful to avoid undesired consequences; circumspect; discreet. Advisable and well-advised. Cautious, farsighted, thrifty, economical." Google defines it this way: "acting with or showing care and thought for the future." As a young man of 20, you would do well to keep these character qualities in mind as you observe, meet, and get acquainted with young women.

For me, life is so much richer shared intimately and long term with a woman of excellence. Speech, finances and good planning are areas to note, and, of course, **you** should be growing in these areas too. In Proverbs 31 it is said of the excellent wife, "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come [she's not a worrier]. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (31:25-26).

Depending on her character, a wife (or a woman, for that matter) can make or break you. Proverbs 12:4 says, "An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones." Being married to your Grandma Newman has been such a blessing to me. I hope and pray the same for you, minus the mistakes I made along the way.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 10:1-11:15
 John 6:43-71
 Psalm 107:1-43
 Proverbs 15:1-3

Guatemala Rescue

For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. 2 Timothy 1:12

When God blessed us with three beautiful children, we dedicated each one to the Lord. They are His and we are the stewards of His gifts. I'm reminded of the above verse as we have a daughter living in Guatemala serving in a child rescue ministry during this Covid-19 outbreak.

Thankfully, we have kept abreast of the situation with Alexis through FaceTime and Text. We became a little more concerned when the president of Guatemala called for martial law. No one is to leave her domain after 4pm until 4am. The city entrances are now under guard.

We started praying and researching ways to get Alexis home. Our government offered a limited number of charter flights for Americans to return. However, there were no guarantees. She could make the four-hour mountainous drive to Guatemala City alone and not even get on the plane. Then she would be stuck in an unfamiliar city, under curfew, and where cases of the virus and crime are much higher. Miraculously, we discovered a local pastor friend in the same predicament. He too was about four hours away, but could travel with her and even get her all the way home. Wow! This had to be God!

However, in her prayer time, Alexis did not get the green light to leave. She sensed that God was calling her to stay. The needs of those in her care were greater than her need for safety.

I felt a momentary chill, not knowing what will happen here or there. It all seems so apocalyptic. But **this one thing I know**: "I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day."

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 8:1-9:27
 John 6:22-42
 Psalm 106:32-48
 Proverbs 14:34-35

Tuesday, May 12

Daughter

After hearing about Jesus, she came up in the crowd behind Him and touched His cloak. Mark 5:27

I wonder what she was thinking. Here she knelt before this man named Jesus. She had worked as hard as she could to get to Him. The crowd was thick, and they were all heading to the house of a man named Jairus. Yet this woman was at the end of her rope. With all her strength she pushed through the crowd to touch this man. Actually, she couldn't even touch Him, just the hem of His robe.

This woman, whose name we don't even know, had bled for twelve years. Every day she had cleaned up some of her own blood. Or she had washed out the blood from her clothes. This bleeding? She couldn't stop it. She had spent all her savings trying to get better, yet every doctor she went to couldn't help her; she only got worse.

Now, as a desperate act, her hope was in a man who had healed others. Could He heal her? She thought so. At least, she thought if she only touched Him she could be healed. She did so and everyone stopped—because Jesus stopped. He wanted to know who had touched Him. This woman was caught.

What was He going to say to her? Was He angry? Was He going to undo what had been done—because, for the first time in over a decade, she felt remarkable. No, this desperate act, this last resort, ended in her hearing Jesus call her "daughter." And He went on to say, "Your faith has healed you." Faith? He saw faith? She saw her last resort, the only option she had left.

When we turn to Jesus for help, even if all other options have failed, Jesus calls us by name and says, "Your faith has made you well." What a Savior!

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 12:1-13:23
 John 7:1-30
 Psalm 108:1-13
 Proverbs 15:4

Rejoice? Really?

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Philippians 4:4 CSB

How are you feeling today? Like skipping, dancing, whooping and laughing? Well, maybe laughing, but not in the “I’m so happy” sense, more in the “life is nuts” sense.

Paul told the Philippian Christians to “Rejoice . . . always.” Rejoice. Have joy . . . always. That’s tough to do. Right in the same passage he says not to be anxious but pray, and you will be guarded by God’s peace.

I think that there is a place of understanding that God can bring us to where we’re not walking around with a fake smile plastered to our face, but we are still joyful. Joy is a strong theme through the book of Philippians where it is an expression of faith, including faith as an expectation of the future that we have in Christ. Consider reading through the book and looking at that word.

In Galatians Paul talks about joy as a fruit of the Spirit inside of us. If we are to rejoice or have joy always, then we are to walk in faith believing what God says *all* the time. Yeah, that’s tough, but let’s work toward it.

Let’s be reminding ourselves of our reasons for joy and encouraging one another to rejoice—not in a fake, hypocritical way, but in an “I am believing the truth” way. Recall the truths in this stanza from “Rejoice” by Dustin Kensrue. And be encouraged.

*We are children of the promise
The beloved of the Lord
Won with everlasting kindness
Bought with sacrificial blood
Bringing reconciliation
To a world that longs to know
The affections of a Father
Who will never let them go . . .*

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 14:1-52
John 7:31-53
Psalm 109:1-31
Proverbs 15:5-7

Friday, May 15

An Abiding Shelter

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you. Isaiah 54:10

It may not be said often enough, much less thought of, but the prophet Isaiah reminds us of the magnitude of God’s love for us.

We wake each day under the watchful eye, the caring eye, of the Lord Almighty.

We may face much in life—we may face much this day—but God’s promise of love and care is an abiding shelter for us each day we live.

For what purpose? One very good one: His peace to guard and guide us this day and every day we live.

The promise of peace in times of great peril is the wind beneath the believer’s wings and the anchor that holds the heart and mind steadfast in peace as that of the glassy sea.

Godspeed and peace, oh believers in Christ.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 17:1-18:4
John 8:21-30
Psalm 111:1-10
Proverbs 15:11

A Nation from a Homebody

The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. Genesis 25:27 NIV

Confession: I hate camping. Theoretically, I think nature is pretty, but I like to look at it through a window from an air-conditioned, indoor space. And I absolutely do not want nature touching me. When I first became a Christian, it seemed that all of the church activities were outdoors—picnics, kickball games, and the dreaded camping. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves so much, and all I could think was “I need A.C.!”

I believe in being a team player and getting behind the activities my leaders promote, so I just offered my attendance as a sacrifice to the Lord. Even so, I felt that there must be something wrong with me if everyone else who loves Jesus also loved these activities. Then I read Genesis 25:27. *Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.* How cool is it that God birthed a nation from a homebody!

Sometimes we can look at certain preferences or activities and assign to them a spiritual importance that God never intended. Beware of assigning “spirituality” to certain behaviors, even loving nature: “But I’m afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your thoughts will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). I’m so thankful that God’s Word sets us free to be who God created us to be.

It’s OK if you love camping, and it is OK if you hate it, as long as you love Jesus!

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 15:1-16:23
John 8:1-20
Psalm 110:1-7
Proverbs 15:8-10

Saturday, May 16

How to Develop a Soul that Rests in the Lord

Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Psalm 37:7

How good are you at resting? I’m not referring to taking a nap, but rather having a soul at peace and rest. I’ve observed *most people aren’t very good at resting.* They have difficulty being still. They fret about things over which they have no control. They become uneasy when things don’t go as planned. Plain and simple, their soul is troubled, like the waves of a storm-tossed sea, unable to experience true inner peace and rest.^{SEP}

A soul that’s at rest in God is a soul free from worry. How is that possible? The key is to *identify what we’re responsible for* and *what God is responsible for.* Anxiety comes upon our soul when we take upon ourselves responsibilities that belong to God. Some things are just out of our control. We need to cast those burdens upon the Lord and leave them with Him. Do you know “The Serenity Prayer,” written by Reinhold Niebuhr? *“Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

Don’t confuse a restful soul with *laziness* or *apathy*. A restful soul does not sit on the couch all day, waiting for manna to fall from heaven; that’s laziness. A restful soul is convinced that God is sovereign and it’s being carefully watched over by the Almighty.^{SEP} Is your soul at rest these days? Have you separated out in your own mind which are your responsibilities and which are God’s? Are you anxious about things over which you have no control—which always should have been left in God’s hands? Take some prayerful time today to think through this. Get a piece of paper, make two columns, and put God’s responsibilities in one column and yours in the other. Then take a few moments to *prayerfully let go of the things in God’s column*; give those areas fully to God. And then . . . watch the peace of God flood into your soul and give you rest.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 18:5-19:24
John 8:31-59
Psalm 112:1-10
Proverbs 15:12-14

Righteousness

No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness.

Romans 4:20-21 ESV

“Righteousness” can seem like a hard thing to wrap our minds around, but “righteousness,” simply defined, is “rightly relating to God.” We all start out our lives “wrongly” relating to God. Because we have wrongly related to the God who is our Creator, our Provider, our King, and our Redeemer, we are separated from Him. We have wrongly related to Him by ignoring Him, by not trusting in Him, by not acknowledging that He is our Creator and that all the good in our lives is from Him alone. We do not acknowledge that we belong to Him, we do not worship Him, nor do we listen to Him, nor obey Him; we do not supremely enjoy Him.

Yet God in His grace made a way for us, the unrighteous, to be made righteous—the death of His innocent Son in our place. Jesus paid the full judgment for our unrighteousness and then rose from the dead.

Rightly relating to God is believing God, believing in His Son to save us from sin and from its rightful judgment, and believing all He has written in His Word. This faith is the foundational response to God by which all other right responses flow. Abraham is our example: “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3 ESV).

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 20:1-21:15
 John 9:1-41
 Psalm 113:1-114:8
 Proverbs 15:15-17

Attentive To Their Cry

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry.
Psalm 34:15 NIV

Our daughter, Grace, and son-in-law are fostering twin boys who were four weeks premature. To say the least, they are exhausted. I must say, my hat is off to all of you parents out there who have twins (or more!). I have had seven children, and, while there were challenging times, nothing compares to two needy, hungry babies crying at the same time! In the middle of the night!

To help Grace get some rest, several mornings a week I get to her house before the early morning feeding. Quite frankly, I think running a marathon might be easier. I am literally running trying to feed one before the other wakes up, or trying to hold a pacifier in one while feeding the other, or just trying to keep a fussy baby quiet so as to not wake up Grace. I am very “attentive to their cry” *and* exhausted by the time I go home.

Unlike me, God *never* grows weary or tired. In fact, Job 36:7 says He does not take His eyes off the righteous! I am helping the boys to be fed and cared for, but God’s answers to my prayers are so much more than that! Here are some: He saves me through His death on the cross. He forgives **all** my sin! He teaches me in the way I should go. He fills me with peace in difficult times. He is my comfort and gives me grace to seek Him and trust Him through good days and bad. The list goes on and on.

The person who never takes His eyes off us is the Creator of the Universe! WOW! He is readily available for every need and concern. My answers to the boy’s cries can be full of frantic running, whereas God answers the prayers of my heart with calm, gentle wisdom and grace.

This is your God! He loves to hear your prayers! Remember and enjoy the fact that He is attentive to your cry.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 22:1-23:29
 John 10:1-21
 Psalm 115:1-18
 Proverbs 15:18-19

Underestimating God

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20-21 ESV

The Pharisees underestimated the humility of God . . . that He would come into our world as a common man. The Israelites underestimated the holiness of God . . . that He would discipline them severely for worshipping other gods. The prodigal underestimated the grace of God . . . he thought that his father would only reluctantly receive him as a servant, but never joyously as a son after his severe rebellion against him. Yet his father *did* joyously receive him as his son when the prodigal returned home, owning the foolishness of his rebellion (Luke 15:11-24).

While we will always underestimate God and the gospel of Christ (Ephesians 3:20-21), let’s endeavor this year to seek to know God the Father as He really is, and His Son as He really is, and His Spirit as He really is. Let’s remember the truth of what Jesus accomplished through His death in our place and through His resurrection!

We discover reality by reading, thinking deeply about, and believing the Word of God. The Bible unveils God and what He has achieved through the saving work of His Son (John 8:31-32; 17:17). While we will never fully comprehend the greatness of God in any of His attributes and while we will never fully grasp the magnitude of what Jesus accomplished for all who believe in Him, we can *daily* come to see more and more clearly until the fullness of sight when we are with Him in heaven (1 Corinthians 13:12)! The less we underestimate God, the more we believe Him to be as He has revealed Himself to be in His Word, the greater will be our joy in Him and the more glory we will give to Him!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 24:1-25:44
 John 10:22-42
 Psalm 116:1-19
 Proverbs 15:20-21

“In All My Born Days . . .”

Imprint these words of mine on your hearts and minds . . . Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates. Deuteronomy 11:18-20 CSB17

The thought I have had often the last few weeks is: “I’ve never seen anything like this.” But it’s true. At the risk of sounding old—“In all my born days”—what are we to do in times like these? Look at God’s command to Israel above. God wants us to remember what He has told us at all times and to pass this on to our children. Earlier He had told them why: “Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves, so that you don’t forget the things your eyes have seen and so that they don’t slip from your mind as long as you live” (Deuteronomy 4:9 CSB17).

God wanted His people to remember how they had come to the place they were. God had brought them out of Egypt. He had sustained them through 40 years in the desert. Their existence up to that point had depended totally on Him. Now as they were about to reenter “normal life,” He wanted them to remember how things really work. *How life works is that God cares for us.* We are sustained by God, although in normal times we tend not to see it.

The trick, when life takes us the other direction—when we go from normal to times where we can’t see around the corner—is to understand things work the same way. God cares for us. He is still there. He has not lost His job. We are still His priority.

So let’s teach our children during this time about the great things that God has done for us. Let’s remind one another of all the ways God has brought us to where we are. Let’s allow this time to focus us on what will never be taken from us. Let us rejoice that we know the God who is there.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 26:1-28:25
 John 11:1-54
 Psalm 117:1-2
 Proverbs 15:22-23

Puppies and Monsters

This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:3-4 ESV

It can seem like a daunting task to reach out to people from cultures, backgrounds, experiences, or thinking different from ours. You might ask, "What can I say that will make a difference when they are so different from me?"

I struggled with this myself until I realized people are people, and they all need Jesus. Jesus talked very straightforwardly to them on the level plain of their spiritual condition before God. He did not pull any punches in relation to morality; in fact, it is where He always seemed to start.

The first thing in dealing with people is not to treat them like puppies, like victims of the world, or God's whim, who need to be hugged and saved by us. They are trapped in the same cursed world we are. Jesus did not coddle the woman caught in adultery by the angry Pharisees, nor did he scold her. He simply identified the morally important things: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" [to the crowd]. "Who remains to accuse you?" "Go and sin no more" (John 8).

Jesus did not become outraged at the injustice, nor did He try to create counter-laws to the event. He simply placed all present in the same boat of sinfulness before a holy God. His Father and ours. This is the start of the gospel.

When we talk to anyone, we can ask, "Why do you do (or think) what you do?" Thus we will get to the core of their moral ground. No matter what their background, that element of their lives will be revealed. There is a right and wrong for everyone, even if it is by their own rules. That is when you can share about the true morality of Jesus' love for them above every perceived human standard.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Samuel 29:1-31:13
 John 11:55-12:19
 Psalm 118:1-18
 Proverbs 15:24-26

Puppies and Monsters – 2

And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Acts 9:4 ESV

We live in an ever-increasingly angry world. Our society is choosing sides and making posts and driving everything to its political value. Lines are drawn in the sand; then swords are drawn. How can we build relationships when everything is trying to pull us apart?

The first thing in dealing with people is to not treat them like puppies—or monsters! The internet is full of people saying, "Look at what that monster is doing now!" People are not monsters, nor should we treat them like monsters if we are commanded to reach them with the gospel.

A person that could have been labeled as such was Saul. He was persecuting the early church in various ways, from accusations to throwing the saints in prison. He looked like a monster. But he believed he was doing God's work in protecting His people from this new cult. What did Jesus do? He asked him the moral question mentioned yesterday: "Why do you do what you do?"

Saul believed he was on the moral high ground. Jesus does not say, "You horrible monster! Stop what you are doing to My puppies!" He simply asks the same question in a different way: "Why are you persecuting Me?" Saul was transformed into Paul the apostle.

We will encounter people who are hostile towards Jesus, the church, and our thinking. The starting point is not to treat them like monsters and go to battle. Start with asking the moral question first. What is their moral motivation? Maybe it is to save the planet or to right an injustice. The moral conversation seems to bring things to the table where Jesus can speak into their heart—because that is where their heart is, and that is what Jesus is after.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 1:1-2:11
 John 12:20-50
 Psalm 118:19-29
 Proverbs 15:27-28

Little Lost Dog

... Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? Luke 15:4 NIV

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. Luke 19:10 NIV

Recently our small, much-loved "grand-doggy" Rufus got out of the yard and went missing! After alerting the police department and animal shelters, our son and daughter-in-law spent the next several hours scouring the neighborhood, both on foot and in car, fruitlessly searching for their beloved dog. Too stressed to sleep, they filled the long hours with maintaining contact with police and shelters on possible leads.

The story ends well. The next day, after nearly 12 hours of being lost, Rufus was turned into an animal shelter by a family who had spotted and graciously sheltered him overnight. Overjoyed owners were reunited with their pet, and the "finder family" was rewarded with ice cream money to celebrate.

Love for one little dog drove his owners to passionately search, alert friends and authorities, lose a night's sleep, and anxiously keep seeking until their pooch was joyously found.

Jesus talked about a similar search and rescue in the verse above, only this one involved one lost sheep. Surely a shepherd would hardly notice its absence, but this shepherd, like our son, passionately sacrificed and searched for that straggler until it was safely located and brought home.

Can you imagine Jesus' heart of passion as He shared this parable with His listeners? He, the Good Shepherd, was surrounded with "lost sheep"—individuals who were hurting, lost in sin, lonely, and confused. And just as He cared for them, so He cares for people today. He was and is that sacrificial and loving Shepherd who gave His all so that we, the lost, could be found!

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 2:12-3:39
 John 13:1-30
 Psalm 119:1-16
 Proverbs 15:29-30

Hide and Seek

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" Genesis 3:8-9

Children love the game of Hide and Seek. When our granddaughter Karissa was three, she was so excited to hide from her pursuing father that she ran through her bedroom door and shut it on her thumb with a slam! As humans we play Hide and Seek with each other sometimes and desperately hope someone cares enough to find us. God has put it in the heart of humans to desire to be sought and found. What do we learn about God's seeking us from the story of Hide and Seek in the Bible?

Adam and Eve have made the grave mistake of doubting God's goodness and plans for them. Eve listens to the suggestion of a lowly creature and believes it rather than her Creator. She then pulls Adam into her choice to take control of her own destiny, to "be like God." Losing their innocence, Adam and Eve experience shame for the first time, and assign it to their state of nakedness. So they hide from their daily Visitor.

Behold the kindness and mercy of God the Father. Surely God knew where Adam and Eve were. Surely He knew what they had done. But He sought interaction with them—He sought renewed communication and honesty from them. So He asked questions: "Where are you? Who told you . . .? Have you eaten . . .?" He Himself sought out and initiated with Adam and Eve, even knowing they had just disobeyed Him. And so He does with us.

God has placed eternity in our hearts and a desire to be sought and claimed by a loving father. Many things distract us from coming to Him (like Karissa's broken thumb!). Will we respond to God's pursuit of us? Will we come into the arms of the pursuing, seeking Father?

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 4:1-6:23
 John 13:31-14:14
 Psalm 119:17-32
 Proverbs 15:31-32

Honored with a Free Meal, Plus

For in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you. 2 Peter 1:11

Monday mornings were always busy times at my job so I was never available to enjoy the free breakfast offered at our local Hy-Vee grocery store for veterans. That morning, having recently retired, I took advantage of it. It was well worth the drive through cold wind and sleet. The breakfast itself was great, living up to my expectations. (Some of us guys from church also meet at Hy-Vee on Saturday mornings.)

What took me by surprise was the “reception line” welcoming and thanking us vets. These people were decked out in uniforms with military or patriotic pins. One of the last people to greet me was a gentleman I recognized as another Saturday morning regular from a different table. Twice I started to show them my “DD 214” but they just said, “No need for that.” I saw old men (that means older than me at 68) hugging each other, and the guy seated across from me pointed out someone in a grocery aisle whom he had actually served with many years ago. Younger folks kept coming around, offering coffee and picking up empty plates.

You know where this is headed, don't you? It made me think of what Peter wrote about, that welcome home meal and celebration in heaven, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, with discussions similar to “Did you serve in active combat? Injured? Martyred? Did your unit survive? I see you're wearing a crown of righteousness. What campaign did you earn that in? You have such a bright shine about you. You must have gained insight (Daniel 12:3). Can you introduce me to some of the ones you led to righteousness?”

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 7:1-8:18
 John 14:15-31
 Psalm 119:33-48
 Proverbs 15:33

Wednesday, May 27

Psalm 139 – “You Hem Me In”

O Lord, You have searched me and You know me. Psalm 139: 1 NIV

Our God knows each of us individually. This psalm spells out clearly how well God knows us. Let us take a walk of prayer through Psalm 139 together.

God knows that I am sitting and writing this right now and what I will be doing as you read this: “You know when I sit and when I rise; You perceive my thoughts from afar” (Psalm 139:2). He even knows what we are thinking. Yikes—what are you thinking? God knows it already.

I love that God is familiar with all my ways: “You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways” (139:3). Isn't that what we all want, someone who knows who we are? God does. He knows me—yet He still loved and choose me to be His. Thank You, Father.

Just the first five verses are enough to make my head explode. Hearing, knowing, and accepting how much God knows me. Me! “Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid Your hand upon Me” (verses 4-5)—I understand God knowing and loving David, the man after His own heart, or even the disciples, Paul, Martin Luther, Calvin, Corrie ten Boom, Billy Graham . . . or other heroes of our faith. But this psalm is saying that God loves me. Unworthy as I am—and God truly knows, even more than I, how unworthy I am. Yet He loves me! He chose me! I am His!

“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain” (Ps. 139:6). Join me in standing in awe of our God.

Submitted by:

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 Clarksville, Maryland

One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 12:1-31
 John 16:1-33
 Psalm 119:65-80
 Proverbs 16:4-5

Duty: The Honor of a Christian

He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8 NKJV

We've all had moments in which we've not felt like doing something we know we should. I sometimes have conversations with (usually young) believers who get caught up about whether they should do a task for God because they **feel** like doing it or because it is their **duty**.

God wants our hearts, to be sure. Our attitudes and motives are as important to Him as our actions. But good attitudes will also spring from right actions.

Scripture is full of accounts of men and women who were faithful in their *little duties* before God. David put himself between predators (bears and lions) and lambs (1 Samuel 17:34-35). Shammah defended a small piece of ground that was growing lentils (2 Samuel 23:11-12). Jesus paid the temple tax for Peter and Himself (Matthew 17:24-27), even though the priests were corrupt. Tabitha was full of good works and charitable deeds (Acts 9:36). Add to this list you who set up chairs or make coffee on Sunday mornings, you who fold bulletins, you who teach Sunday School while the sermon is preached, you who stay after the fellowship meal to wash dishes—and, yes, you who preach the sermon.

Robert E. Lee wrote this to his son: “You have always to do what is right. It will become easier by practice, and you will enjoy, in the midst of your trials the pleasure of an approving conscience. That will be worth everything else.”

Cultivate, Christian, the conviction of doing your duty (“God, what would You have me **do**?”), and you won't get caught up in **feelings** about particular tasks.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 9:1-11:27
 John 15:1-27
 Psalm 119:49-64
 Proverbs 16:1-3

Thursday, May 28

Psalm 139 – “Darkness Is as Light”

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

Psalm 139:6 NIV

Let us continue our prayerful walk through Psalm 139. Before we begin, pull out your Bible and reread the first six verses, remembering how much God knows you.

No matter where you are, God is with you. There is no such thing as a God-forsaken place: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast” (verses 7-10).

I love the last part of this verse: “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light will become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you” (verse 11). I need not be afraid, even when there is darkness—literally or figuratively. Darkness is as light to God.

There is no place, no circumstance I can be in that God is not with me. I might not listen or allow Him to work in my life, but He is there. He is waiting and willing to guide me. I just need to open my eyes, He is here. His “right hand will hold me fast.” This is so comforting. God is holding me fast. He is protecting me. My “darkness is as light” to God. Regardless of my circumstances, I can say, “God is protecting me.” I am His!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 13:1-39
 John 17:1-26
 Psalm 119:81-96
 Proverbs 16:6-7

Psalm 139 – “You Knit Me Together”

I will praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalm 139: 14 NIV

We now come to the most popular verses in Psalm 139. But before we continue our prayer walk, go back and prayerfully read verses 1-12. They set the stage for what David talks about now.

God knew about me before I was born: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (verses 13-14).

God not only knows me, He also wonderfully made me: “My frame was not hidden from you when I was hidden from you, when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (verses 15-16). God knew all the mistakes I would make, all the sins I would commit. But He chose me anyway!

My worries pale next to God’s thoughts: “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of the sand. When I awake, I am still with you” (verses 17-18). “How vast is the sum of them,” “outnumber the grains of the sand”—and I’m worried about what someone thinks of me, how I look, my bills, my health . . . Not that my worries don’t matter, but that **all** the answers are found in God!

“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!” (Psalm 139: 17).

Amen and Amen!

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 14:1-15:22
 John 18:1-24
 Psalm 119:97-112
 Proverbs 16:8-9

Psalm 139 – “Slay the Wicked!”

Search me, O God and know my heart. Psalm 139: 23

We are coming to the end of our prayer walk through Psalm 139. Reread verses 1-18 with me so we can appreciate the entire psalm.

Yesterday we read the most popular verses of Psalm 139. Today, we start with the least used verses of the psalm. Let us continue our walk of prayer.

“If only You would slay the wicked, O God!”—Wait a minute, how did that get there? Aren’t we reading Psalm 139? Is this the wrong chapter? Nope, this is still Psalm 139. “If only You would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!” (Ps. 139: 19).

Okay, admit it, don’t you sometimes wish God would go ahead and kill some of the wicked in our world? God knows we do—He knows our thoughts already; we might as well admit it. David did.

In verse 20-22 media, Hollywood, and government come to mind: “They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who . . . rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.”

Do I, though? Do I hate the evil in the world? Do I count God’s enemies as my enemies? Or do I accept them, try to fit in, ignore or excuse the hatred towards God? I need to hate evil, not give in to it.

God knows where we are. He knows our circumstances. He knows our thoughts: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (verses 23-24).

Turn to Him. Let Him lead and guide You.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 15:23-16:23
 John 18:25-19:22
 Psalm 119:113-128
 Proverbs 16:10-11

Sunday, May 31

Starting Families and Starting Churches

Do you observe the calving of the deer?

Their offspring become strong, they grow up in the open field;

They leave and do not return to them. Job 39:1,4

We may laugh while watching *Failure to Launch*, a movie about a 35-year-old man who doesn’t want to grow up and is still living at home with his parents. The reality is disheartening to parents whose adult child is still living in their basement playing video games!

What do we learn about healthy parenting from nature? The verses above tell us that the deer gives birth, her offspring grows up in the field, then it leaves its mother and doesn’t return. The normal experience in the animal kingdom is for the young to become strong and leave to live on their own and have their own offspring.

We see this normal progression of reproduction in nature. The offspring grow up and leave to begin their own family. Humans all around the world follow this pattern. Why don’t we see this same reproduction in our churches? Most churches don’t have “offspring.” It should be normal for a church to birth other churches, in the same way that having children and raising them to start their own family is normal for parents.

What is going on to prevent this reproduction in our churches? Maybe it’s true because most churches never *plan* to reproduce. I have met couples who never wanted children. It was sad for me to hear them express this desire. It’s also sad for God to hear that we don’t want to birth churches.

If we do want to start new churches, then we will be more serious about making disciples! Reproducing disciples is essential to reproducing churches.

What’s your family plan? What’s your church’s plan?

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Samuel 17:1-29
 John 19:23-42
 Psalm 119:129-152
 Proverbs 16:12-13